

PS5 | PS4 | PSVR | RETRO

**CHRISTMAS
GIFT GUIDE**

From tech to merch,
the PS5 must-haves
detailed for
every budget

PLAY



ISSUE 21
CHRISTMAS 2022
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GOD OF WAR RAGNARÖK

A godly gift for PS5?
Read our expert
verdict inside

→ **WE'VE PLAYED IT!**

RESIDENT EVIL 4

Kick horror in the face!
How this revamp is
better than ever

**IRON MAN, BLACK PANTHER,
AND MORE! MARVEL'S NEW
GAMING PLANS GO BIG**

**MOVE OVER MONSTER
HUNTER – EA'S WILD
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Welcome



How the year flies. Yet even though we're ready to get festive and take a look ahead at PS5's great 2023 to come (check out our calendar for a taste of that), we're able to make room to fight demons at any

time of year. Wo Long: Fallen Dynasty (p48), from the studio behind Nioh and Ninja Gaiden, is set to be an early 2023 favourite.

Not only have we spent plenty of time leaping around ancient China slicing, dicing, and casting magic with an early Wo Long build, we also sat down to chat with Team Ninja about the bold new series. Building on the 'mascore' gameplay the studio's known for, the new setting and faster-paced twists to combat result in something that feels quite fresh.

If you want to get fresh more materially, our annual Christmas Gift Guide (p58) is here to help. From information on the must-have hardware that can supplement a PS5 or PS4 console (an SSD could change your life), or

items for the collector like vinyl and even aftershave, it's all here. There are neat things for every budget, so give it a look.

But the future is very nearly upon us, and we've had our heads full of it. Quite literally. We kick off the issue with our big PSVR2 hands-on (p6) joining our gameplay impressions of Resident Evil 4 (p32), Street Fighter 6 (p44), The Callisto Protocol (p46), Tchia (p40), and more. It's safe to say there are some incredible releases that should be on your radar. Further afield, we dig into Marvel's new gaming lineup (p10), the many new Silent Hill projects announced (p12), and CD Projekt Red's busy future (p16).

The reviews section is equally massive, with an extra-large look at God Of War Ragnarök (p68). Five years in the making, it's been worth the wait. Plus the verdicts on Gotham Knights (p74), Call Of Duty: Modern Warfare II (p84), Overwatch 2 (p96), and beyond. PlayStation is tearing it up at the moment. We hope you enjoy reading all about it!

Oscar Taylor-Kent
EDITOR

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GAME OF THE MONTH
God Of War Ragnarök
BEST DEMON
Demi-Fiend (Shin Megami Tensei III)

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SEE PAGE 56 FOR MORE DETAILS

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THIS MONTH'S FALLEN FEW



Dashiell Wood
CONTRIBUTING WRITER
Gunning through sci-fi, fantasy-, and real-life-themed shooters, he's a bona fide terminator.

GAME OF THE MONTH
Paladins
BEST DEMON
Asylum Demon
(Dark Souls)



Jess Kinghorn
GAMES EDITOR
We managed to pry the pumpkin off her head just in time to get festive for holiday season swag.

GAME OF THE MONTH
God Of War Ragnarök
BEST DEMON
Morrigan Aensland
(Darkstalkers)



Miriam McDonald
OPERATIONS EDITOR
Her usual dragon quests might not be as violent as the one in Wo Long, but she's up for taking this one on nevertheless.

GAME OF THE MONTH
Signalis
BEST DEMON
Malroth (Dragon Quest)



Milford Coppock
MANAGING ART EDITOR
Ticking a bingo reference off his, well, bingo card, Milf's happy to see Leon back where he belongs, kicking Las Plagas.

GAME OF THE MONTH
God Of War Ragnarök
BEST DEMON
Akuma (Street Fighter)

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FALLEN DYNASTY

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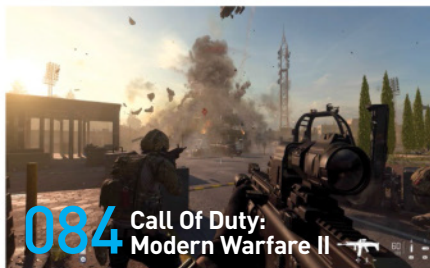
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Insider

Getting you closer to PlayStation's most exciting stories, people, and culture

■ 4K OLED screens, improved motion controls, and more draw you further into the action. ■

Something about coming face to face with Resi Village's vampires in person hits differently.

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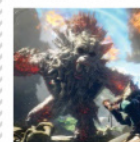
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Wild Hearts has you felling giant beasts



Realistic to a terrifying degree

We go hands-on with PSVR2 and encounter the statuesque Lady Dimitrescu

Talk of a Zuckerberg-shaped future in which the 'joy' of work meetings is translated into a soulless VR void has dominated the virtual reality tech conversation to the point it's easy to forget these devices already have a fun, mainstream, practical application: videogames! Beat Saber, Astro Bot Rescue Mission, and more are great uses of VR, and PSVR2 is only going to make things better. (You won't have to pretend to be interested in a Zoom meeting while using it, for one thing.) We went hands-on with the new kit at Tokyo Game Show to learn how it will take us even deeper into the games we love.

The original PSVR proved to Sony that there's a not-insignificant number of PlayStation owners keen to enjoy immersing themselves even more deeply in their favourite games. Naturally Sony is developing a new piece of hardware for PS5, and the company has major ambitions for this device, intending it to be for everyone who plays games, not just VR enthusiasts.

Features such as 4K OLED screens inside the headset, greater head- and eye-tracking, and improved motion controls ensure games look even better and respond more accurately to your movements,

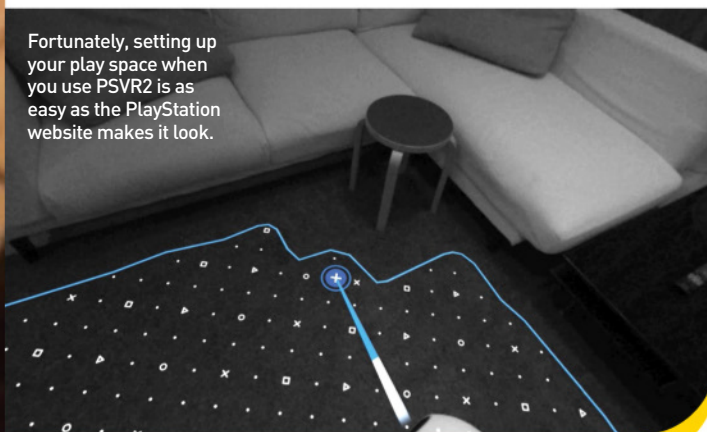
drawing you further into the action. In-headset feedback is designed to bring multisensory experiences to the vastness of space in No Man's Sky's and the wastes of Horizon. All that's enough to make us concerned about the price of the hardware (which has yet to be announced) and whether it will be possible for most players to afford it. But those are worries for another time: we're slipping on the headset for ourselves to visit Resident Evil Village in person and experience a different sort of fear.

RETURNING TO UNREALITY

Of course, the process isn't as simple as putting on the biggest pair of glasses you've ever seen and jumping straight into a game – you've got to set it up the first time you use it. If you're familiar with

Not only does it feel like it protrudes less from our face, it blocks out more external light.

Fortunately, setting up your play space when you use PSVR2 is as easy as the PlayStation website makes it look.



unboxing new consoles, you'll expect that. Even so, the headset takes less getting used to than we expect, and we're immediately struck by how much more comfortable than the old model it is to wear. Not only does it feel like it protrudes less from our face, it blocks out even more external light with its stronger, more comfortable seals. Slipping it on and adjusting it feels an easier process too.

Securing it properly and tightening it so it fits properly takes us a bit of time, nonetheless – because we're testing the hardware at Tokyo Game Show, it's already been through many different setups (and



SENSE OF MOVEMENT

The original PSVR required you to use Sony's aging Move controllers – the Sense controllers are a major improvement. Featuring the same resistive triggers as the DualSense and improved motion controls, they really increase immersion.

the staff have taken extra care when sanitising it as a precaution against Covid too). Obviously that's not going to be a problem for you at home, so you should be able to pick up and play once you've got everything set up.

Once we're settled, we scan the play environment with the built-in cameras so the device knows how much room we've got to move around in, then calibrate the controllers, adjust the focus dial, and boot up the game. Despite playing in a packed convention hall, we immediately lose ourselves in the digital world projected around us. Although PSVR2 is a wired headset, we don't feel trapped – there's a single five-metre wire sticking out the device, ensuring we've got ample freedom of movement. It's a big improvement on the original's cumbersome wired setup. Now in Resident Evil Village's mansion, we twist and contort our real-world body as we peer around corners and attack

enemies in the game, without noticing our slender tether even once.

LOOK UP, MUMMY

The segment of the game Capcom has picked out for our introduction to a new level of virtual reality is the moment when Ethan Winters meets the intimidating Lady Dimitrescu within her castle. While the final game will offer the full campaign, entering the mansion and meeting the iconic tall vampire lady from a new perspective makes a strong first impression on us.

Controls have been adapted to the PSVR2 Sense controllers, allowing us to move intuitively. Once we've unsheathed a knife from our forearm, we press **R2** to hold it, then physically swing our arms to swipe at oncoming enemies. We draw guns from our leg holsters in a similar fashion, and even have to perform a full manual reload after ejecting the empty

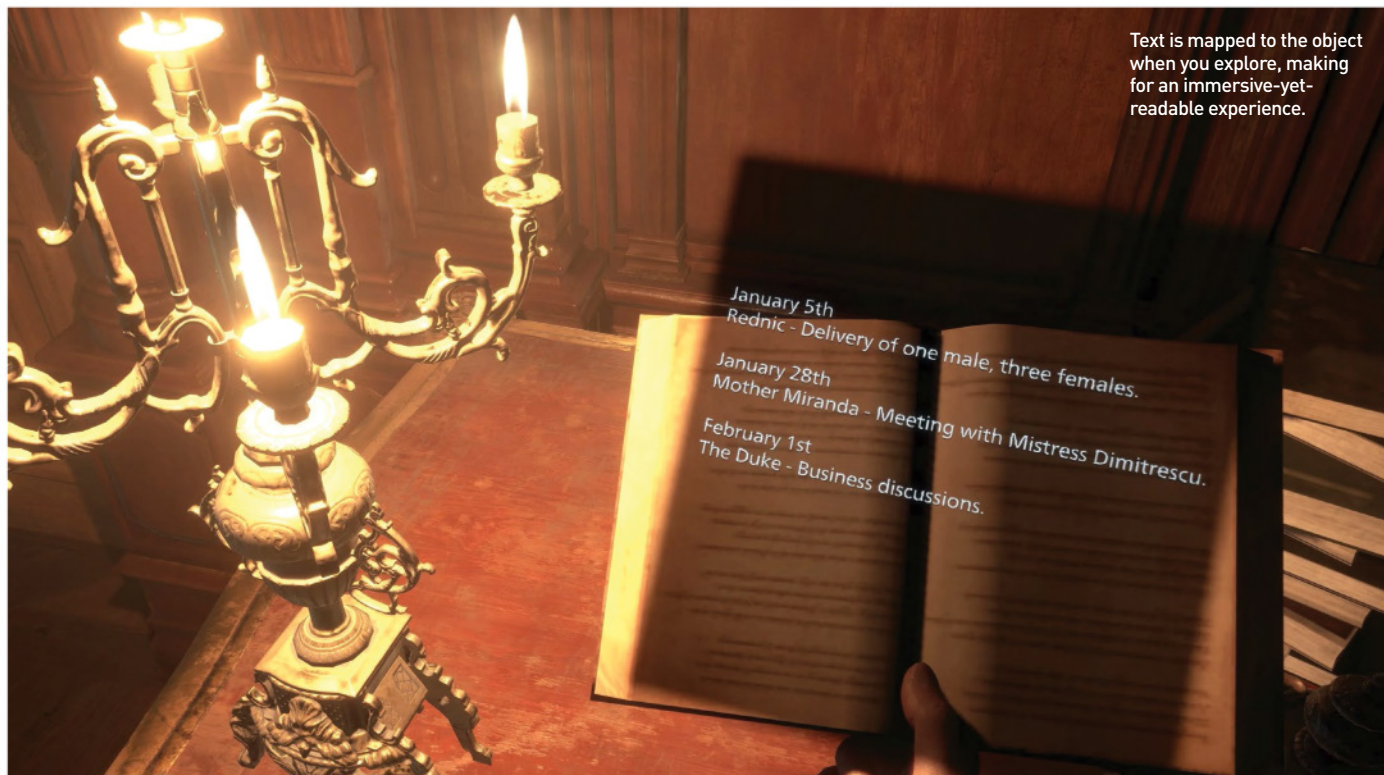
cartridge. We feel deeply involved in the action, for better and for terrifying worse.

Capcom knows exactly what, or should we say *who*, is the star attraction for many players. Lady Dimitrescu overpowers our vision in all her eight-foot glory when she enters the room, looking down on us as though we're a chained puppy (no rolled-up newspapers here, mind you). Naturally, Capcom's staff are on hand to take pictures of our helpless stares, an advert for the technology and for how Lady D stole the hearts of the world.

If PSVR's last iteration felt like experimental technology, this headset feels like the real deal, a device for everyone. Distracting in-eye artifacting is entirely eliminated, with the only visible artifacts being the rendering limitations of the hardware. Heart rate spikes noted by our watch tell us everything we need to know about the engrossing nature of Resident Evil in VR. The only thing holding PSVR2 back is the inability for some players to get hold of an actual PS5. But if you can get both the console and the headset, you'll be in for a treat.

★ Both Resident Evil Village's VR update and PSVR2 are expected early in 2023.

■ Lady Dimitrescu overpowers our vision in all her eight-foot glory when she enters the room. ■



Text is mapped to the object when you explore, making for an immersive-yet-readable experience.



1 Even the smallest tussles take on a new dimension when you're immersed in PSVR2. **2** Watch the space around you! You can't help ducking and weaving out the way when monsters shamble at you. **3** Ponder anything you wish from a new perspective. **4** Objects aren't rooted to you. Go ahead and throw that knife to smash stuff. **5** Caught on camera! This is what it's like when you lay eyes on Lady Dimitrescu's towering form for the first time.





1

PLAY INVESTIGATES

A Marvel-ous future

We're not just getting Spider Man 2, a whole multiverse's worth of superhero games is on the way

While MCU fans have come to expect multiple movies a year, proper videogame adaptations of Marvel comics have been relatively few and far between (the PlayStation-exclusive Spider-Man games from Insomniac certainly **ahem** stick out). That's set to change, as multiple developers are throwing their capes into the ring, giving us some welcome variety.

Is deluging us with games the right move? Quite possibly, because one way in

which the upcoming slate of games differs from the MCU, as confirmed in an interview with GamesIndustry.biz, is that the titles are not connected. Each has the opportunity to stand on its own.

WORLD AT WAR

Given Captain America was himself the result of an underground experiment during one of the most perennially popular settings in gaming, the Second World War, it's surprising that we haven't already seen a videogame adaptation focused solely on

the period (beside the underrated movie tie-in on PS3, of course).

Fortunately, a new action adventure title starring Captain America and Black Panther was teased at the first-ever Disney And Marvel Games Showcase earlier this year. It's too soon to say much about this as-yet untitled project, but we do know that a wartime setting will feature at points throughout the campaign. With Amy 'Uncharted' Hennig's studio Skydance New Media at the helm, we can predict there will be plenty of action and

1 Worlds are set to collide when Captain America and Black Panther team up, with a dual focus on WW2 France and Wakanda. **2** After a VR outing and a live-service RPG, it's about time

we got the chance to don Iron Man's iconic suit in a proper action game. **3** Given Spider-Man's (admittedly enjoyable) silliness, we're excited to see Insomniac handle a grittier take on another

of Marvel's best-loved characters, Wolverine. **4** Fan-favourite characters long neglected by the cinematic universe, plus your own unique one, The Hunter, take centre stage in *Midnight Suns*.



adventure for the pair, probably with an 'Oh craaap' or two for good measure. Skydance seems like the perfect studio to capture the quippy MCU movie magic.

The teaser hints at twin settings, a besieged Western Europe and Wakanda, where Black Panther and Captain America will play central roles in an action-driven campaign, joined by Gabe Jones from the *Howling Commandos* and Nanali from the *Dora Milaje* (both capable heroes in their own right). The historical setting means we'll be getting to grips with a young Steve

almost entirely on the team's billionaire top dog. Development's being led by Motive Studio, which is also responsible for *Star Wars: Squadrons* and the forthcoming *Dead Space* remake; this is a studio that already has plenty of experience when it comes to building compelling activity around flying and wearing a metal suit.

Centring a single hero feels like the right approach to take with Tony Stark, as he's a complex character who deserves to be given the chance to shine in his own

"single-player, action-adventure" that'll dive deep into the character and make you truly feel like the hero – so don't expect his mech-suit powers to be watered down. Team lead Olivier Proulx comes fresh off Marvel's *Guardians Of The Galaxy* from Eidos Montreal, which is good news for everyone who appreciates that game's love for the source material (we just hope Stark's super-powered suit can allow for some more compelling combat).

DIAL H FOR HERO

And that's just the new stuff. Marvel's *Midnight Suns*, which combines the darker, magical side of the comics with turn-based battles and light RPG mechanics, is finally being released in December after a few delays. Then 2023 will see the release of Marvel's *Spider-Man 2* from Insomniac, a long-awaited first-party PS5 exclusive, with the studio's grittier Marvel's *Wolverine* to follow. A massive number of gamers are also superhero fans; it's about time the studios let the pages flow.

★ Which of these games excites you the most? Let us know @PLAYgamingmag

1 The titles are not connected. Each of the upcoming Marvel games has the opportunity to stand on its own.

Rogers fresh out of the superhero soldier tube joined presumably by King Azzuri, T'Challa's grandfather, as Black Panther.

NEW SUIT

Another alternate interpretation of the Avengers is on the way from EA in the shape of Marvel's *Iron Man*, which focuses

narrative. In the past, we loved his standout moments in Marvel's *Avengers* and enjoyed stepping into the suit ourselves in *Iron Man VR*. He's got what it takes to carry a game on his own.

While details on what we'll actually be doing as *Iron Man* are sparse at this stage, EA Motive emphasises the game's a



A HOLE LOT MORE

Konami didn't just announce games. Interactive streaming series *Silent Hill Ascension* will begin next year, and a new film from director Christophe Gans, called *Return To Silent Hill*, is also on the way. The future looks frightening.



Wood ya believe it?

Dashiell Wood's hot gossip

During the Behind The Sims Summit, a celebratory stream commemorating 22 years of **The Sims**, EA finally revealed plans for the future of its flagship life simulation franchise. Most significantly, the development of a new entry was officially confirmed – a versatile 'creative platform' codenamed **Project Rene**. The title is still in the "super early" stages of development, but short clips of alpha gameplay point towards a renewed focus on customisation, new online social elements, and the much-anticipated return of a furniture colour wheel. This is all good news for long-suffering fans, but it's worth bearing in mind that this isn't officially **The Sims 5** just yet – a fact that could very well change on the long road to release. The stream also marked The Sims 4's permanent transition to free-to-play, offering newcomers unrestricted access to the base game ahead of two new paid expansion packs set to launch next year.

Silent no more

Konami announces a slew of new projects for favourite horror destination



We'll revisit the town that refuses to be forgotten on PS5, but is Bloober Team up to the task of reimagining this PlayStation 2 classic?

The obvious joke to make would be that we never stopped seeing that town in our restless dreams, and that we still thrash about whenever we think of Homecoming. But, clichéd quips aside, our dreams have finally come true: after more than a decade with little more than a peep from the series, **Silent Hill** will return.

The headline act is *Silent Hill 2*. Like a *Mannequin* springing back up after taking a battering, *Silent Hill 2* will come home as a from-the-ground-up remake from Bloober Team. Developed using Unreal Engine 5, it will be a 12-month timed exclusive on PS5 during an as yet unannounced release window. In addition to the studio behind *Layers Of Fear* and *The Medium*, Masahiro Ito (the original series creature designer) and Akira Yamaoka (the composer of many iconic soundtracks) are also involved.

That said, there are some big departures. For starters, it sounds like the characters have been recast with new voice actors. And on top of shiny (but hopefully still a bit grimy) new visuals, action will shift from the original's third-person perspective to a more modern over-the-shoulder camera angle. Beyond that, it's a faithful retelling of James Sunderland's search for his disappeared wife Mary in a town that seems to know all his secrets.

HOMETOWN BLUES

The *Silent Hill 2* remake is far from the only thing to shout about. It turns out that Glasgow-based studio No Code

has been hard at work on *Silent Hill*: *Townfall* since its last game, *Observation*, debuted in 2019. Flickering video footage throughout the teaser suggests it may continue the thread of voyeurism found in No Code's earlier work, but with no firm release date yet, we'll be looking over our shoulder for *Townfall* for a while yet.

Also announced was *Silent Hill F*, which looks like it's about to bring back florals in a big way. Mouldy old jokes aside, this project has piqued our interest for a few reasons besides the blooming body horror. For one, *F* is swapping the series' mainstay American settings for an overgrown locale somewhere in Japan, sometime during the 1960s. The studio behind *Resident Evil Re:Verse*, *NeoBards*, is handling development, and the story has been penned by Ryukishi07, who also wrote tragic, spine-chilling visual novels *Higurashi When They Cry* and *Umineko When They Cry*. With so many projects to look forward to, this town is going to get pretty noisy over the next few years.

★ Which *Silent Hill* project are you looking forward to? Tweet us @PLAYgamingmag

It's not quite reinventing the wheel, but the fluid motion of races leads to some impressive effects.

Back at the wheel

Criterion helms the anime-inspired Need For Speed Unbound

Criterion, developer of Hot Pursuit and 2012's Most Wanted, is returning to the wheel of EA's flagship arcade racing series after almost ten years away. Titled Need For Speed Unbound, this upcoming entry brings underground racing to the streets of Lakeshore – a fictional region of the US based on midwestern cities like Chicago.

Thanks to a striking new visual direction inspired by street art and urban

graffiti, this open-world city will be your canvas. Illustration-like driving effects illuminate your surroundings with colourful tags as you zoom around town, adding extra oomph when you hit jumps or perform boosts. The slick results seem particularly impressive in motion, and a renewed focus on car customisation ensures that you will have more control than ever when it comes to how things look on the move. The expected array of unlockable cosmetic wraps and paintjobs

will be joined by new options allowing you to toggle effects like blooming tyre smoke or comic-book-style speed lines.

TOKYO DRIFT

The cars promise to be more lifelike than ever, but character models are going to be rendered in a more abstract anime style. It's a bold direction for a series that has always been wedded to realistic visuals, but one we're optimistic will pay off. We've wanted to see an official Initial D adaptation on current-gen platforms for some time but, with a Skyline GT-R confirmed for the launch vehicle lineup, this might be the closest we ever get.

Illustration-like driving effects illuminate your surroundings with colourful tags as you zoom around.

★ Buckle up, Need For Speed Unbound races onto PS5 on 2 December.

DEV ACCESS

What the Flock?

Ricky Haggett and Richard Hogg attempt to explain **Flock**, a cosy co-op game about collecting animals and hanging out

One thing Hollow Ponds' Ricky Haggett and collaborator Richard Hogg's games have in common is that they're not easy to describe in a sentence. The latter jokes, "Can we have four sentences please – maybe five?" The duo's forthcoming game **Flock**, announced via a trailer during this summer's Annapurna Interactive Showcase, doesn't buck the trend.

"That video is pretty much a teaser," Haggett admits. "We've never really made a thing that shows less of the game, but we're also at that point where there's things about the game that we don't want to say, partly because we want to hold some stuff back and also because there's stuff that we literally aren't sure will make it into the game."

As it turns out, **Flock** is easier to summarise than afterlife narrative puzzler *I Am Dead* or the vague whimsy of *Hohokum*, a former PlayStation exclusive made by Haggett's previous studio Honeyslug, though the long, birdlike creature we've seen reminds us of the snakelike creature in the latter.

Essentially, players ride these birds around an open world while collecting a flock of creatures, beginning with something simple like sheep, but eventually gathering a variety of species, all of which are dreamlike twists on their real-life analogues rather than one-to-one counterparts – think of how you might imagine a sheep if someone described it to you and you'd never seen one.

TOGETHER, SEPARATELY

The big difference from their previous titles is that **Flock** has been designed with online multiplayer gaming in mind, a decision driven by the pair's experience of the pandemic. "We spent a lot of time playing videogames [online] with our friends, and we were seeking out experiences which sort of allowed us to just be in a place and hang out," says Hogg. "The ones we gravitated towards week after week were ones where you could just have a chat rather than spend time talking about the game. Sometimes it was just side-by-side single-player games where we're all just

doing a thing, and occasionally we'll chat about the thing we're doing."

So although **Flock** is described as co-operative, the suggestion is that players can also do their own thing without having to interact with each other, aside from trying to seek out creatures for their flock. While they've yet to agree just how many players should be able to participate in a game ("more than two, less than 16", Hogg suggests), Haggett adds that they hope the final game will be one that players are happy to play not just with their friends but with strangers.

"A lot of our thinking about multiplayer has been about playing with people you know," he explains. "But Nathan Gary from Annapurna, he worked quite closely with Thatgamecompany and published

You'll be playing with random strangers who'll be flying around with you.

Journey, and we had a really good conversation with him about people playing with people you don't know, and how you facilitate a 'hanging out in a nice place' kind of vibe where you're perhaps gently collaborating with people you're not talking to and don't know."

"He persuaded us that we should definitely allow strangers to join your game or not tick the box that says 'friends only,'" adds Hogg. "I can definitely imagine you'll be playing with random strangers who'll be flying around with you, spotting creatures for you to catch, and sending emotes. We just have to figure out what tools to give people to find their own



Flock has a similar cosy, vibrant palette to *Hohokum*, which Haggett worked on.

level of comfort with strangers joining their game."

MOUNTAIN DUE

Then there's the world, which is actually a mountain. Players begin at the peak's campsite, and gain more land to explore as the surrounding clouds drop over the course of the game. This was the devs' way of placing a boundary on the world without having to add overtly artificial walls. They hope that players will find the world big enough to "get pleasantly lost without it feeling overwhelming" or reaching for fast travel.

"We played quite a bit of *Red Dead Redemption 2 Online* during lockdown and that felt like we were just going for a big old walk," says Haggett, although **Flock**'s movement is at a quicker pace and on a bird. "Traversal is kind of what you're doing, and I love that personally. Our world doesn't actually take you that long to get around, but there is a sense of going on a journey as the main thing that you're doing. Hopefully it has that feeling!"

*** Interested in playtesting **Flock**? Contact Haggett via Twitter @KommanderKlobb**

1 To add creatures to your flock, charm them through birdsong. **2** There's no room for grieving. **3** Procedural generation of creature locations should mean there's no fixed route when exploring.







BACK TO NIGHT CITY

Players returned to Cyberpunk 2077 in droves thanks to Netflix anime *Cyberpunk: Edgerunners*. A lovingly animated ten-episode show by Studio Trigger of *Kill La Kill* fame, there are no plans for a second series despite its massive popularity.

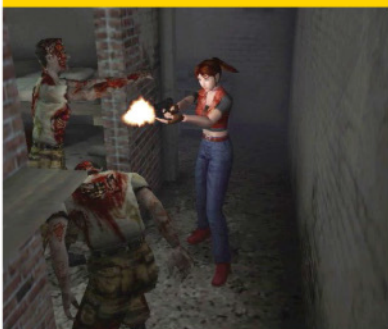
PlayStation voices

The month in mouthing off

"PEOPLE AND IDEAS ARE MEANT TO BE ETERNAL; ORGANISATIONS MAY WELL BE TEMPORARY."

MARTIN LUIGA WRITES FOLLOWING THE DISSOLUTION OF THE ZA/UM CULTURAL ASSOCIATION.

"[IF THE] OPPORTUNITY COMES, MAYBE." WHEN ASKED ABOUT THE POSSIBILITY OF A RESIDENT EVIL CODE VERONICA REMAKE, PRODUCER YOSHIAKI HIRABAYASHI DOESN'T RULE IT OUT.



"IT'S AN INCREDIBLE GAME. IT'S MY FAVOURITE." ACTOR OSCAR ISAAC CONFIRMS HE'S A METAL GEAR SOLID SUPERFAN WHILE RESTATING HIS HOPES FOR A BIG-SCREEN ADAPTATION.

The Future is RED

CD Projekt announces Witcher and Cyberpunk projects alongside new IP

In *Phantom Liberty*, V is compelled to work with the feds – and you can bet Johnny Silverhand is gonna have a lot to say about *that*.



We've not seen the last of futuristic metropolis Night City – nor dishevelled silver-haired monster slayers. Witcher and Cyberpunk developer CD Projekt Red has announced multiple continuations of its heaviest hitters, plus something completely new.

First, let's talk about the leader of the pack: The Witcher. While *Wild Hunt* concludes Geralt's arc, there are plenty of Witcher stories left untold. CD Projekt Red has already teased *Project Polaris* with a shot of a lynx medallion. As another story-driven, open world RPG set to kick off a brand-new Witcher trilogy, this one's the biggie. Developed in-house by about 150 devs, it's deep in pre-production, and the plan is to release all three games that make up its arc within the same six-year span.

But that's not all from a series proving to be a valley of plenty. The studio behind indie roguelike *The Flame In The Flood*, *The Molasses Flood*, is setting sail for The Witcher universe with *Project Sirius*. Developed with support from CD Projekt, we won't see this one for a while either.

Finally, there's *Project Canis Majoris*, which was recently revealed to be a ground-up remake of the very first Witcher game in Unreal Engine 5. This one's in the hands of *Fool's Theory*, a third-party studio staffed by

Witcher series veterans, which has also provided support on *Baldur's Gate 3* and *Divinity: Original Sin 2*.

TRANSMISSION INTERCEPT

Cyberpunk 2077 – love it or hate it, we're definitely going to see more of it. Next year will see PS5-only DLC *Phantom Liberty*, a spy thriller set in a new district of Night City. A fully fledged sequel will eventually follow; called *Project Orion*, this far-off followup will be developed internally, allowing CD Projekt Red to shoot for the moon.

Last but not least is something far removed from both jacking in and cutting down. *Project Hadar* is an all-new IP that CD Projekt Red has been incubating since 2021. Still in the conceptual phase, what will hatch from this little egg is sure to take us all by surprise.

★ Which of these whets your appetite? Tweet us @PLAYgamingmag

Phoenix, Titan, Garuda, Ramuh, Shiva, Odin, Bahamut... and all together now: Ifrit! The Eikonic gang's all here to carve out the fate of Valisthea.

Getting the lie of the land

Meet the most important FFXVI character: Valisthea itself

We already know a lot of things to expect from Final Fantasy XVI in 2023, including the most cursed knowledge of all: that our protagonist is called *Clive*, of all things. But there's still something missing from this picture – the background.

Clive's quest crosses Valisthea, a world punctuated by Mothercrystals. These towering obelisks grant magical aether to the people but such abundance doesn't last. Enter the Blight, an infection that saps life and magic from the land. The scarcity

left in its wake causes tensions to flare between Valisthea's six realms – and then the Eikon Ifrit picks a fight with Phoenix.

POWERS COMBINED

Clive's home, The Grand Duchy of Rosaria, is a collection of provinces that find strength in each other and the Drake's Breath Mothercrystal. Joshua, Clive's younger brother and Phoenix's Dominant, is destined to become Archduke when he comes of age. Many realms install Dominants as advisors or laud them as protectors. For example, in

the southern sands of the Dhalmakian Republic, Titan's Dominant has the ear of parliament. The isolated kingdom of Waloed is ruled by Odin's Dominant, while its spies are led by Garuda's Dominant.

However, Rosaria's neighbour, the Iron Kingdom, regards Dominants as abominations. It's home to the Crystalline Orthodox, whose faith dictates that anyone tainted by an Eikon be executed. Naturally, Ifrit's Dominant does not hail from this kingdom; the second fire Eikon suddenly appears as the Holy Empire of Sanbreque marches on Rosaria. Sanbreque itself boasts the firepower of the crown prince's Eikon, Bahamut, but the identity and allegiances of Ifrit's Dominant are a mystery to be solved next summer.

■ Scarcity causes tensions to flare between Valisthea's six realms – and then Ifrit picks a fight with Phoenix. ■

★ Which is your favourite Eikon and Dominant? Tweet us @PLAYgamingmag

THE BIG SHOT

A real howler

Wild Hearts pits you against big beasties in February

No, that's not the name of our latest Monsterhearts RPG campaign, it's a collaboration between Dynasty Warriors developer Omega Force and EA Originals. Set to debut on 17 February on PS5, Wild Hearts is part Monster Hunter, part Toukiden, and all animal.

While the resemblance to Toukiden is unmistakable, it's clear Omega Force intends Wild Hearts to be a fresh start. Yes, you're once more hacking up giant monsters inspired by Japanese folklore, but you have many more options for how to go about it. For a start, you can build ziplines and glider platforms. You'll need these expanded traversal options as the world around you is much grander – a benefit of being on PS5 rather than PS Vita. The beasties, too, match that significant increase in scale, requiring sizeable traps to match.

It's just as well you won't have to face these ferocious foes alone. In co-op, one of your buds could run interference while you take five to construct a catapult, which you set off just as they tear past with a giant boar on their tail. It's almost like you planned it! Party up and get hunting in 2023.

Numbers Game

We do the maths

10.3

Million players took to the pitch for FIFA 23's launch week, making EA's final FIFA play-off a celebrated one.

2,500

Pennies for the official Uncharted Compass, from the PlayStation Gear website – gift-box included.

05

Tales in Overwatch: The Short Story Collection. Originally published online, this physical collection features many popular characters.

500

Millilitres of liquid can be stored inside Numskull's official Jet Set Radio spray can water bottle.

65,000,000

Copies of the Witcher games have been shifted, across the whole series. Coin: tossed.

152

Pages in Kirk McKeand's The History Of The Stealth Game, where he quietly explores the genre, including Metal Gear and Splinter Cell.

DEBATE

How close to the original should a remake be?

Should devs just update the visuals or overhaul everything from story to action when remaking a game?



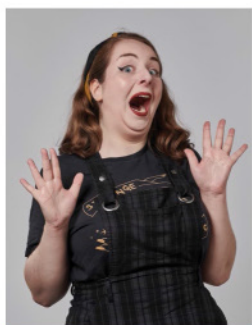
MIRIAM MCDONALD
PRODUCTION EDITOR



BE LIKE THE MOVIES, AND GIVE A STORY A NEW SPIN."

I think devs should be allowed to do things their way. Hollywood's unafraid to take a familiar story and rework it, and game studios should follow suit. How many Draculas have we seen? How many more would we watch? (All of them, in my case.) So I'd be happy to see a studio take a familiar game's story and redo it their way. In fact, I'd go a step further and say any new game *should* be different, because it's being made by different people with their own skills and styles. Let their talents shine, and stop using remakes as a way to milk gamers' nostalgia for cash. ■

■ **Stop using remakes as a way to milk gamers' nostalgia for cash.** ■



JESS KINGHORN
GAMES EDITOR



IN MY VIDEOGAME PRESERVATION NIGHTMARES, I SEE THAT TOWN..."

You don't want to know how much I paid for my copy of *Silent Hill 2: Director's Cut*. Hunting down physical copies was the best way for me to play for a long time (we do not speak of the HD collection), so I should be stoked about Bloober Team's remake, right? It's complicated. It's clear Bloober has no small amount of reverence for *Silent Hill 2* – but no matter how faithful the remake, it can't replace the original. I only wish some of the resources going into this were being spent on preserving the original or making it accessible on modern hardware. ■



DASHIELL WOOD
CONTRIBUTING WRITER



TO STAY RELEVANT, REMAKES SHOULD SHAKE THINGS UP!"

We've already seen the success of brilliant beat-for-beat recreations of classic games like *Resident Evil 2* and *Demon's Souls* but, as far as I'm concerned, the most interesting remakes are the ones that aren't afraid to make some changes. A game like *Final Fantasy VII* is already playable on practically every platform under the sun, so it made complete sense for Square Enix to introduce some new plot elements when it came to the remake – the result is great for newcomers, but has a few surprises for longtime fans of the series too.

Changing the established formula isn't guaranteed to lead to success (I'm looking at you *Resident Evil 3*), but it's still a highly compelling reason to replay. As pretty as its updated visuals are, I would have much more interest in picking up a copy of *The Last Of Us Part I* on PS5 if it had some meaningful new story content to boot. ■



OSCAR TAYLOR-KENT
EDITOR



IT'S A DIFFICULT LINE TO WALK, BUT WHAT WE LOVED ABOUT AN ORIGINAL NEEDS TO BE INTACT."

Thanks to inconsistent terminology, it's often not clear what you're in for with remakes, remasters, or whatever a studio decides to call its rerelease (looking at you, *The Last Of Us Part I*). I definitely see the value in remaining faithful, especially when it comes to completing a vision that wasn't possible with previous tech, but sometimes that can be dull for old players or can lose some of its soul along the way. But the same goes for remakes that make big changes (my gaze shifts towards the rather lacking PS4 *Ratchet & Clank* redo). What's important is that the heart remains either way, and I think the upcoming *Resident Evil 4* looks to strike that balance. ■



SPORT



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IN
THE
MOOD
FOR...



Classical music

Let these classical composers take PlayStation to the Proms!

1 VALIANT HEARTS: THE GREAT WAR

Despite the cartoony art, this narrative adventure game is overall a tragic exploration of human stories from WW1. Nonetheless, it has moments of levity, including a car chase sequence soundtracked to the can-can, a piece originating in Offenbach's *Orpheus In The Underworld*. (The tune was actually added by Carl Binder, mind you.)

2 BIOSHOCK

Of all of Rapture's citizens, poet, composer, sculptor, and playwright Sander Cohen is one of the most memorable. In one standout moment when you confront him, he sends splicers to kill you while Tchaikovsky's *Waltz Of The Flowers* plays.

3 GRAN TURISMO 7

As an arcadey aside where you race against a countdown measured by the beats of a song, Gran Turismo 7's Music Rally is good fun. The mode is bookended by *Hooked On Classics* Parts 1 and 2, where you drive along to medleys performed by the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra.

4 CATHERINE

For Atlus' most adult game, Shoji Meguro took inspiration from the classics. As philanderer Vincent Brooks ascends nightmarish towers, his struggle is soundtracked by remixes of classics whose composers include Holst, Beethoven, and Mussorgsky. Most recognisable is Handel's *Hallelujah Chorus* at the end of a level.

5 SAYONARA WILD HEARTS

Debussy's dreamy *Clair De Lune* can be heard in many games, but there's something masterful about giving it an electronica makeover for our heartbroken protagonist to skateboard along to before she turns into the Fool. It's an inspired prelude to Simogo's playable pop album.

6 RESIDENT EVIL

One of the most famous puzzles in survival horror involves playing Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata* on a piano to open a secret room. While Jill is as good with her hands on a piano as she is at picking locks, Chris has to rely on Rebecca to play the tune.

7 KINGDOM HEARTS

Proving that Mussorgsky's a popular choice for boss themes, the final area of Kingdom Hearts sees Sora and company battling the demon Chernabog to the composer's *Night On Bald Mountain* (rearranged by Yoko Shimomura). The sequence is itself based on the concluding segment of Disney's *Fantasia*.

8 DUNGEON ENCOUNTERS

This turn-based RPG from Hiroyuki Ito may be barebones in its presentation but depth is found in its battles soundtracked by classics from the likes of Mussorgsky, Wagner, Chopin, Bizet, and more – performed on electric guitar. And all overseen by Final Fantasy maestro Nobuo Uematsu to boot.

9 ETERNAL SONATA

You can't talk about classical music in games without mentioning the game starring Frédéric Chopin. Well, except you're playing him in his final hours before he succumbs to TB and enters a fever dream world where he's in an anime JRPG. Not a bad way to go.

HONOURABLE MENTIONS

The Evil Within

Clair De Lune strikes again, this time providing the comforting soundtrack for the one safe place in this survival horror.

Ghostwire: Tokyo

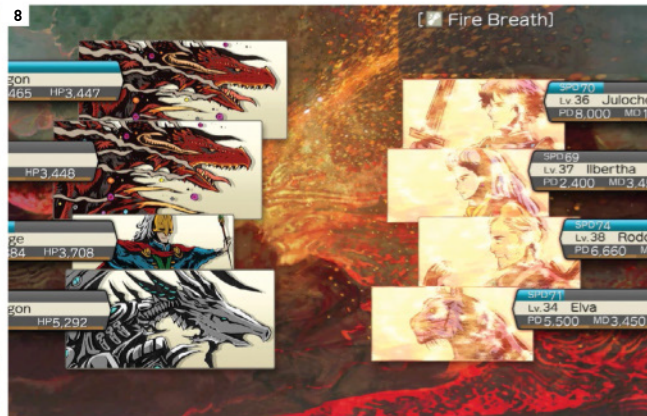
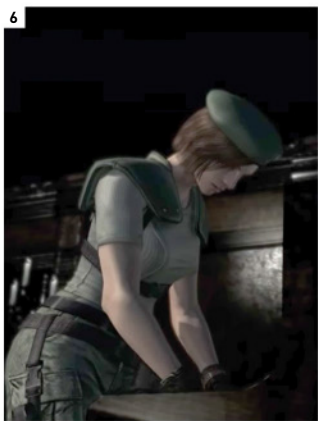
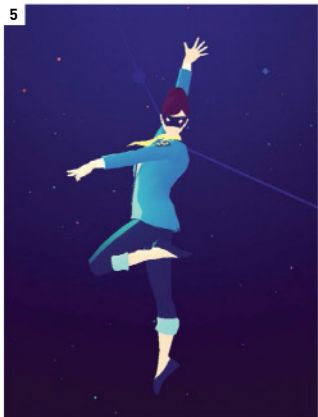
Don't miss the side-quest featuring Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata* – better yet, this one is performed by developer Shinji Mikami himself!

Everybody's Gone To The Rapture

The soundtrack hit the classical albums chart, then was removed, leading to accusations of snobbery.

Did we miss your favourite classical tune? Got an In The Mood For idea? Show and tell at twitter.com/PLAYgamingmag





OPINION

"I DON'T WANT TO ESCAPE TO ANOTHER GALAXY; LET'S KEEP THINGS REAL."

Could we have something that takes place on present-day Earth, please?



WRITER BIO

As she waits for a whodunnit, the only thing Vic Pheseley is playing is noughts and crosses in the dust on her gaming shelf.

Given everything PS5 has to offer, it's no surprise that developers wish to use it to take us to places of the future or back to days gone by. We're treated to tales woven in rich histories and intricately detailed space-age realms that we're now able to immerse ourselves in. Personally, though? I'm bored to tears by it.

With the market absolutely saturated with science fiction and fantasy, it's becoming harder to discover a more grounded narrative to play. Hey, if it's your bag, then that's great. Yet I'm fed up of some outlandish event being needed to kick off proceedings for a 25-hour-plus, character-driven story. Don't get me wrong, *The Last Of Us* is my favourite game to revisit, but if the outbreak weren't the game's catalyst we'd have no heart-wrenching tale to play. We need more space for things like mysteries and thrillers to take centre stage – they dominate other media, so why isn't there a little more wiggle room within gaming?

I'm desperate for new titles to focus on the minutiae of life, extraordinary things happening to ordinary people. Now I'm aware that there are everyday folk in a myriad of gems, I just wish their stories didn't have to revolve around fire-breathing

dragons or any impending asteroids that are due to obliterate earth. I'm all for escapism, yet it doesn't always have to be delivered in a reality that's so far out of reach.

QUITE THE DROUGHT

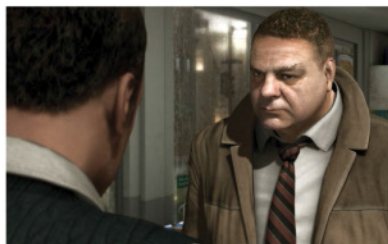
Although flawed in areas [we really don't need to talk about *that* controllable scene, do we?], Quantic Dream's *Heavy Rain* delivers the mystery perfectly – and it's seemed as if it's been tumbleweeds for thrillers like this ever since.

Following the death of his son (press ⊗ to Jason, RIP) and breakdown of his marriage, Ethan Mars is hit with devastation again, as his other son Shaun is kidnapped by the Origami Killer. Ethan is left with no choice but to run a gauntlet of tasks and push himself to the limit in order to save his child. Three other main characters are woven into the harrowing plot, all interconnecting to form one of the most compelling stories I've ever played.

Heavy Rain follows something you wish never to experience; it's dripping with consequences as you're responsible for making crucial decisions which affect the final outcome. The horror of what the very real world holds is at its core, rather than pairing its peril and character's emotions with an overarching supernatural element from the off. I enjoy the occasional *fictional* plague and mythological adventure – just not every other release.

Feeling that emotional weight behind the controller in making these decisions just pulls me further into the story. I care about these characters and I'm doing my best to make sure that every button I press is the right one, and immediately, my immersion feels personal. Focusing solely on a world that could mirror my own breaks down that invisible barrier, enabling me to get that much closer to the narrative.

I want more games like this in the near future; I crave more realism and I long for that to be added into captivating, everyday stories once more.



The final act of *Heavy Rain* continues to remain unmatched with its jaw-dropping revelations.

■ We need more space for things like mysteries and thrillers. ■

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OPINION

“CHAMPION GAMES SET IN JAPAN BEING CREATED BY JAPANESE DEVELOPERS.”

We all benefit from their insight and familiarity with their country's history



WRITER BIO

Long-standing champion of Japanese games Alan Wen is glad he no longer has to import them and deal with the language barrier.

Japanese games have been experiencing a renaissance for a few years now, but I believe we're seeing a new exciting milestone for the Japanese games industry. With the likes of Like A Dragon: Ishin and Rise Of The Ronin on the horizon, we're finally seeing Japanese developers telling their stories to the world through big-budget open world games.

Turn the clock back a decade ago and this wasn't the case. Indeed, Sega skipped on localising Ishin's original PS3/PS4 release, just like it originally had no intention of bringing Yakuza 5 to the West. But it was also the case that the Japanese industry experienced the most growing pains when adapting to HD game development on bigger budgets, finding itself lagging behind the West in technical expertise. Even as we entered the PS4 era, if you compared Western and Japanese titles with elements like open world design or voiced dialogue, the latter would often feel second-tier.

At the same time, we've also seen a huge growth in interest in Japanese culture, and games like Persona 5 and Yakuza aren't just excellent games but a form of digital tourism (just as well, as real tourism has only just opened up again in Japan post-pandemic).



Feast your eyes on Team Ninja's upcoming open world PS5 exclusive, Rise Of The Ronin.

But as immersive as these are, they've also been limited in scope by how much of these places you could actually explore. You can, then, understand the appeal of part of Japan being rendered as a proper open world in Ghost Of Tsushima.

MADE IN JAPAN

But while even Sega has acknowledged Tsushima's success at helping popularise games set in Japan with Western audiences, this is still a game from US-based studio Sucker Punch, which I always felt only managed to depict Japan at surface level, whether it's magpieing different facets of Japanese culture into its gameplay and setting (haiku poetry a few centuries before its invention, why not?) or its fetish for Kurosawa aesthetics.

If you want to see a truly authentic side of Japan rather than just an exotic virtual playground, it needs to come from Japanese developers themselves. That's the reason I'm excited about Ishin and Rise Of The Ronin, as they're both set during the Bakamatsu period, an important part of Japanese history that's unfamiliar to Western audiences, though it's the perfect hook since it led to the end of Japan's isolationist policy and the beginnings of its Westernisation. Having fully caught up on tech, with Ishin a from-the-ground-up Unreal Engine remake and Ronin a PS5 exclusive, they're also stories that can shine as much as any Western blockbuster.

That's not stopping Ubisoft from wanting a slice of virtual Japan with Assassin's Creed Codename Red, although the publisher has said it's getting assistance from Ubisoft Japan and cultural consultants to ensure as authentic a depiction as possible. The better option, however, is to empower Japanese studios to tell their own stories in their own unique cultural specificities, a good example being Koei Tecmo's upcoming Wild Hearts, a monster hunting game set in a fantasy feudal Japan, where EA is serving as the publisher. Big in Japan? Japanese games are big, period. And they're only going to get bigger.

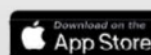
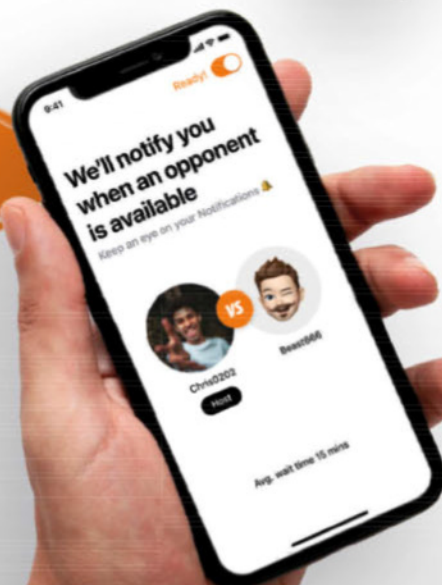
Big in Japan?
Japanese games
are big, period.



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REPLIES

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CURSED PLAGUE

I was really happy to see a PS5 upgrade for Plague Tale Innocence as I had planned on replaying it in anticipation of Requiem. Imagine my dismay, and that of many players on Ps5 looking at online chat, when you get almost to the end only to find it pretty much impossible to finish due to the aim controls being broken. So many fans have apparently contacted them about this but no response or patch. How do we know that this same issue won't occur in Requiem? I am so looking forward to this sequel but am nervous about this.

Amanda Evans

As you can see from our review on p80, it's definitely possible to finish Requiem – Luke played it all the way through. So relax, and enjoy the rats!

LET'S CATCH UP

I got the impression from last month's issue that there was near hysteria at the prospect of only one triple-A blockbuster game on the horizon (God Of War Ragnarök).

"THIS 'QUIET TIME' COULD BE USED TO FINALLY PLATINUM YOUR FAVOURITE GAME."

Am I the only one that thinks this may be a good thing? I might slightly catch up on my backlog of games. Although I have done well at not adding to it over the past year, there are so many games that I want to get to.

This 'quiet time' could be used to finally platinum your favourite game, or go back to some of those games that you had forgotten about.

I am currently trying to finally complete Alien Isolation, which I started back in 2015 but found too hard and frustrating. It has been in my loft for the past seven years but I have dusted it off, set the difficulty to novice (my gaming ego took a bit of a knock!) and am resolved to finishing it this time.

Next game from the backlog to try and complete, Bloodborne! Wish me luck!

David Wright

Good luck!

STAR LETTER THE LAST, NOT FINAL

Hello, I have never written to this mag but Laura Francis' write up about game hangovers really gave me the feel to write. She is so right. I can relate to what she said, I felt that way when I played the Last Of Us for the first time on PS3 – the game, its world and characters, was everything to me. I beat the game four times in a row on every setting as I didn't want to leave the world. Bought it and beat it on PS4 as well and will be getting it on PS5. I didn't want to leave that world and was heartbroken and lost when the end credits roll. So yes, Laura is right.

Leo Berry



Those worlds do get addictive, don't they? Certain members of Team PLAY are concerned about the layouts of the cities in future Witcher games; others could now find their way around parts of Tokyo thanks to the Yakuza series. We hope you enjoy revisiting Joel and Ellie's world on PS5.

CAN I GET A RT?

The most pleasing tweetings from our timeline...



@J9PVFC
Great November issue! Article by Dan Solomon on @skateEA is a good read. A F2P Skate game could be as big as THPS1, given the lack of that genre right now & the biggest itch to part with your money is always nostalgia / reliving your childhood



@TheLudensAtlas
Reading this months @PLAYgamingmag trying to get excited for AC Mirage, I'm hoping it's a step in the right direction for the series, it's desperately needed!



@Dirkgently1066
Terrific opinion piece from @The_Phease this month for @PLAYgamingmag.

I've been very down on the recent spate of remakes but this offers a compelling argument for their value in maintaining an entry point to classic titles and franchises.

TROLL OF THE MONTH



@JordanMiddler
What's the policy on Dash hate mail

[He loves it – ed]



@sambridgett
Excellent opinion piece from Luke Kemp in this month's @PLAYgamingmag. Absolutely no time for the insidious jingoistic, militaristic nonsense big-budget FPSs have turned into.



@FrostyRogue
Love the new issue but where's your letters page gone? Second issue without it

[Here it is – ed]



"WOLVERINE IS MY FAVOURITE MARVEL CHARACTER. NOW ALL WE NEED IS A SCARLET WITCH VIDEOGAME."

WE'D LIKE THAT, ALEXANDRA TASHKINA



"GET A CAPTAIN AMERICA GAME THAT RUNS ALONG THE LINES OF WINTER SOLDIER."

THAT TOO, AJ PEEPS



READERS' MOST WANTED

Which games are bleeping loudest on your radar?

01

Assassin's Creed Mirage

Mirage sneaks in straight at the very top of your list.

FORMAT PS5, PS4

ETA 2023

02

Final Fantasy XVI

The more we see of it, the more we want it! Clive, we're waiting for you.

FORMAT PS5

ETA 2023

03

Silent Hill 2

Given how well-loved the original is, we're surprised this didn't rocket in at no. 1. Too scary for ya?

FORMAT PS5

ETA TBC

05

Marvel's Wolverine

Your chance to be one of the coolest heroes? Seize it with both clawed hands.

FORMAT PS5

ETA TBC

04

The Callisto Protocol

Are you ready to be scared in new ways? Definitely!

FORMAT PS5, PS4

ETA 2 DEC

VOTE NOW!

Tell us the five games you can't wait to play at play@futurenet.com

EXIT POLL

Our Facebook fans answer a final question



WHICH PAIR ARE YOUR FAVOURITE PLAYSTATION DUO?

24% Love the classic Nathan Drake/Sully pairing.

15% Choose Jak and Daxter.

10% Will always hang on for Ellie and Joel.

42% Say Ratchet & Clank. Legends!

2% Say... Snake and Otacon. Yes, really.

7% Reckon Chloe and Max are best.

NEXT MONTH

We're looking ahead to 2023... but what genre of game have you played most in 2022?

HOPE AND HOMES FOR CHILDREN



URGENT APPEAL



Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine is not just a humanitarian crisis for the Ukrainian people; it's a child protection emergency.

Up to 100,000 children warehoused in Ukraine's vast orphanage system – a network of over 700 buildings – risk being forgotten. Left to face the dangers of war alone as staff flee. As families are torn apart or forced from their homes, many more children are at risk of being separated from the love and protection they desperately need. Worse still, they are at risk of trafficking, or being placed in overcrowded, understaffed and poorly resourced orphanages in border countries.

We must act now.

Born out of the Balkans conflict 30 years ago, we've championed the vital importance of family and community-based care of children and our teams are on the ground in Ukraine, Moldova and Romania to ensure this war does not rob children of the love and protection they need now more than ever. Across all three countries, we're directly supporting displaced families and unaccompanied children with material

and emotional support. We're working closely with authorities to keep families together when they are at their most vulnerable and to fight for the safe tracking, monitoring and care for children without parental care. And we won't stop when the fighting stops.

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Previews



"STEALTH IS
MORE OF AN
OPTION NOW."

32 Resident Evil 4



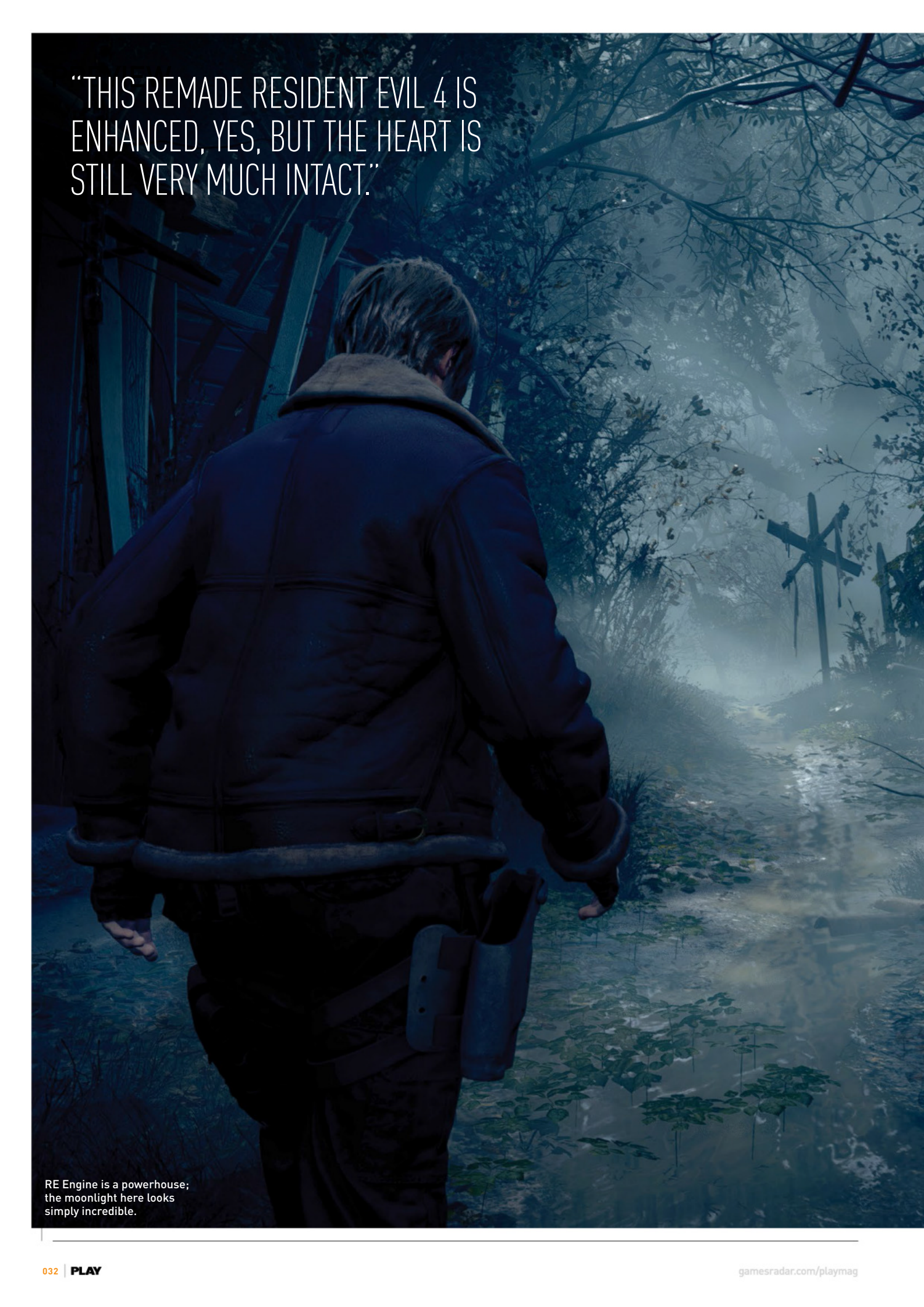
044

Street Fighter 6

It's got a lot of younger competition, but the venerable fighting series still packs a punch

HIGHLIGHTS

RESIDENT EVIL 4 32 | SCARS ABOVE 36 | HUBRIS 38 | THE LEGEND OF HEROES: TRAILS INTO REVERIE 39
TCHIA 40 | STREET FIGHTER 6 44 | THE CALLISTO PROTOCOL 46

A full-page background image from the video game Resident Evil 4. It shows the character Leon S. Kennedy from behind, walking through a dark, foggy forest at night. He is wearing a brown leather jacket and has a handgun holstered on his hip. The scene is illuminated by a soft, blue moonlight, creating a mysterious and eerie atmosphere. Bare trees and a wooden cross are visible in the background.

"THIS REMADE RESIDENT EVIL 4 IS
ENHANCED, YES, BUT THE HEART IS
STILL VERY MUCH INTACT."

RE Engine is a powerhouse;
the moonlight here looks
simply incredible.

FORMAT PS5, PS4 / **ETA** 24 MAR / **PUB** CAPCOM
DEV CAPCOM / **PLAYERS** 1

Resident Evil 4

Back to the old me

Leon Kennedy's still got it. Backed into a corner by vicious, infected villagers in the middle of a creepy forest after being pursued through a ramshackle house, all he has to say for himself is "I'll see myself out", before hurling himself through glass like it's just another day on the job. It's a good first impression.

Settling down to play this long-awaited remake at Capcom HQ (in a suitably darkened room), we have to collect ourselves before we begin. Resident Evil 4's original release has become iconic for good reason. It changed Resident Evil from slower-paced survival horror into something that felt action-driven yet no less frightening, with a creepy yet campy thriller script. So why change what wasn't broken? This Resi 4 is enhanced, yes, but the heart is very much intact.

DEAD KENNEDYS

As we begin, with Leon treading carefully through a forest and creaking house, it's as devilishly atmospheric as Resident Evil always is. The beats of the opening are the same as we remember, but rich in detail. The lighting is striking, moonlight highlighting Leon's path forwards, incredibly realistic to the eye in the way it bounces off the tiled rooftops.

Of course, the first house you come across is home to danger. After venturing inside and killing a strange, violent

villager in self-defence, quite quickly Leon is set upon the very same man, apparently revived. All twitches, these infected villagers are hard to get a good shot at, and this one seems especially dangerous as he grabs and mauls us.

A knife to the face is the remedy the villager craves, but it comes at the cost of our knife's durability. While we can struggle free from grabbing hands at the cost a bit of health, the knife is a violent way out whose cost is tracked by a different meter.

With the danger dial turned up, we make our way back through the house,

now filled with other enemies patrolling. Compared to Resi 2's shambling undead, there's something deliciously unsettling about the more intelligent Las Plagas. This parasite means the poor hosts are still human inside, and their obvious sentience makes their violence all the more distressing. When we catch one strolling past the entry to a corridor, we're reminded of Resident Evil VII's Jack Baker. Except this is a whole village of them.

Stealth is more of an option this time around. Leon is much more fluid to control (as you'd expect – the lad needn't root himself to the floor to aim any more and can turn on a dime). It's nothing too precise, but enough to evade enemies for a time, and maybe get a good stabbing in. Still, we end up being pursued through our glass-shattering exit by Las Plagas, full of confidence in the game even ten minutes in. Leon »

FACTRICK

1. REALITY BITES

As well as delighting on big-screen TVs, it's coming to PSVR2 headsets. Details have yet to come.

2. RAT ATTACK

You can shoot the rat that gives you a minor jump scare early on. Your only reward is a sense of sorrow.

3. LIKE A VERSION

The original RE4 notoriously had many creative reboots, including one idea that became Devil May Cry.

TRACK RECORD

New studio M-Two was originally developing this remake, but then the project was brought back in-house, with most of the same Capcom team who made the excellent Resident Evil 2 remake on board.



» Kennedy is as much the quippy action hero as ever, and there's still a nasty dark streak here as well.

BINGO HALL

Naturally our demo takes us through to the famous opening scene in the village proper, packed with enemies who burn our police escort at the stake. The extra fidelity with which you control Leon comes into its own as we approach a grisly scene. Being able to rely on stealth more allows us to scoot around for pick-ups before the carnage begins.

While this sequence always contained a lot of enemies, here they feel genuinely overwhelming. They just. Don't. Stop. Coming. Fortunately the village is built with many an alley to duck through. Las Plagas, even at their most basic, are tough enough to be intimidating when you have only a pistol and they're ganging up on you. We're grateful that the core combat loop of tagging enemies with bullets before rushing in with a spin-kick to the face when they're stunned is present and correct in this game, and the way they go tumbling is more satisfying than ever. With a steady hand, it's more than enough to clear some breathing room or give us a chance to duck through clawing hands. Mashing

out of a grab and flipping an old lady over is great fun too. A parry with **1** can stop a wielded weapon connecting (even a thrown axe), meaning Leon feels super-zippy and responsive without having to dive out of danger.

Soon enough Dr Salvador appears, chainsaw in hand and bag on head. He's unstoppable, tearing through the limbs of his comrades to get to us, and sealing off avenues of escape by bringing down structures. Even setting the barn on fire doesn't help, as he pursues us ablaze. We take refuge in a house, throwing everything we have at him, while we kick down ladders to stop villagers crawling inside. Then, of course, they all stop. Motionless. Before shambling towards a church in the distance. It's as creepy as it was first time around. "Where are they all going, bingo?" Leon asks, before the title appears and ends our demo. This is still Resident Evil 4, but slicker than ever, and we can't wait for the full game.

IMPRESSIONS

Visually arresting, wonderful to control, and faithful to the original's quirky humour and dark atmosphere, this could well be the best Resident Evil ever... again! Bring on the chainsaws.



1 We've no idea if you can really parry a chainsaw with a knife, and to be frank we don't want to try. **2** Leon's goal is to track down and rescue Ashley Graham, the US President's kidnapped daughter, who's gone missing somewhere in Spain. **3** A rickety bridge stained with blood is worrying, but even so somehow the least of Leon's problems. **4** This farmer's had a bountiful harvest, but it ain't healthy fruit and veg he's after.

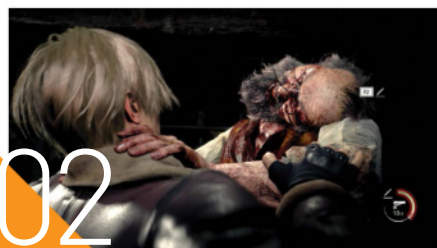


Leon's travel diary

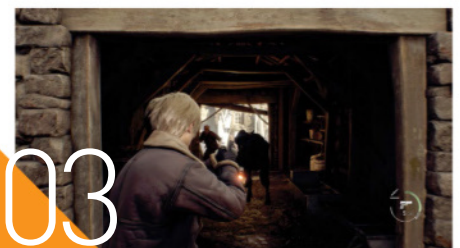
Taking a trip to find himself (and the US President's daughter)



They have some really interesting cuts of meat here; it's all way more organic than the stuff we have back at home. (Smells a bit strange, though.)



The locals were really welcoming, and even wanted to give me a hug after we just met. I can tell I'm going to meet a lot of new friends over here.



They showed me around their village and I got to meet their cow, and they said something about church bingo later? What's that chainsaw noise...?


FORMAT PS5, PS4 / ETA 2023 / PUB PRIME MATTER / DEV MAD HEAD GAMES / PLAYERS 1

Scars Above

Following the science

Science fiction often likes to tease us with the big question of whether we are alone in the universe before answering with a definite, deadly 'No', leaving us asking the followup question of, 'How the hell am I going to survive this?' That's the case in *Scars Above*: when a strange alien structure appears over Earth, the Sentient Contact Assessment and Response team (SCAR) is sent to investigate, only to be flung off to a mysterious exoplanet.

This third-person action adventure shooter has the vibe of a lower-budget *Returnal*, and a protagonist sporting a Lara Croft ponytail (only here you're an astronaut rather than a tomb raider). Kate Ward isn't some super-soldier but a scientist – the other SCAR members, who she's now trying to find, are also scientists and engineers. Kate fortunately knows her way around a gun and can dodge-roll out of danger but she's ultimately more vulnerable than your standard military protagonist and has a better chance of surviving by using her head than letting rip with firearms.

Indeed, before we even find a gun when we go hands-on for ourselves, we discover Kate's able to approach objects and, when prompted, hold  to scan them, aiding her research into this alien planet. Her engineering background means she's also capable of taking newly acquired materials and combining them to craft useful items like healing stimulants.

This is still an action game, though, and a potentially tough one at that. Kate can be ambushed from all directions by alien creatures, including one that likes to sink into the boggy ground and then rise up at our feet. There are a few soulslike elements, such as the need to manage your stamina and the way exploration will eventually open up a path that proves to be a shortcut to an earlier area. Fortunately, we emerge from our session without dying, mostly thanks to scavenging enough materials to craft stimulants to spare.

LOST IN SPACE

While melee is possible, we prefer to keep our distance from danger. Using our firearm effectively requires more than a finger on the trigger. Kate's initial weapon, VERA, is a railgun that also has electrical properties. This comes in handy when we lure an enemy into water so that they enter 'wet' status, which makes them

vulnerable to an extra-damaging electric shock when we fire at them. Electricity being what it is, the shock also affects other wet enemies in the vicinity.

We soon get hold of a Cryo Launcher and a Thermic Charger, which have ice and fire properties respectively. We're able to switch between weapons easily in any given situation, such as when we stumble across a bunch of alien cocoons and need to set them alight before something that we'd rather not deal with hatches out of them, especially as some other monstrosity is already shambling towards us.

SCAR QUALITY

As well as being handy in combat, the weapons come in useful for some light puzzle-solving, such as when we need to power up and open a gate – firing several electrical charges at it with the VERA does the trick. The Thermic Charger, meanwhile, is great for burning away webbing blocking our path. Those examples should seem fairly simple, but as with any scientific exploration the thrill comes from making new discoveries, so we're hoping for some more sophisticated puzzles and enemies where the solution may not be poking out as obviously as a highlighted weak point.

That's where scanning should be crucial, revealing, for instance, an enemy's weakness and behaviours so you're prepared next time.

We may be lost on some unknown alien planet, then, but our ability to interrogate and interact with its flora and fauna, as well as some strange technology we're not all too sure about, makes this an immersive adventure we're keen to continue.

IMPRESSIONS

With survival depending upon using your wits and resources as well as your combat prowess, there's more to this third-person science-fiction action adventure than meets the eye.

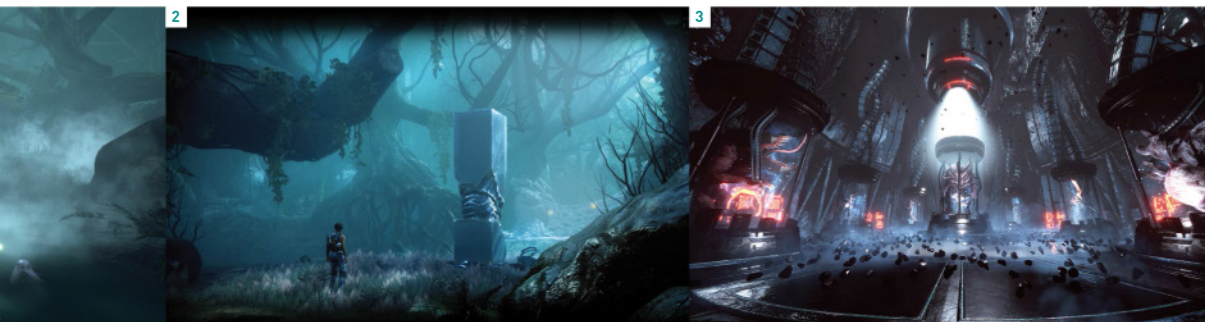


4 Rather than simply blasting away, you need to exploit enemy weak points.

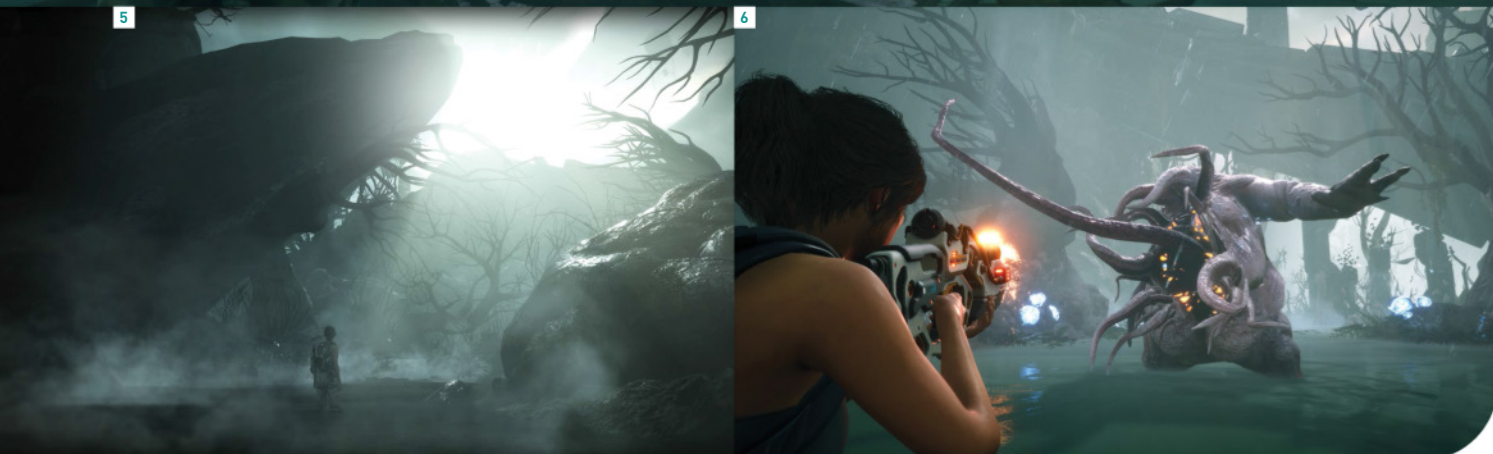
5 Kate learns as she explores further, able to spend ability points across Engineering and Xenobiology skill trees. **6** Exploiting the environment with the weapon you have equipped is also crucial in combat – you can freeze monsters like this in the water where they stand.

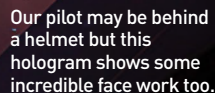
TRACK RECORD

Based in the West Balkans, Mad Head Games has been around for a decade, primarily making casual games. *Scars Above* marks the studio's shift to developing action games for consoles, though a second, unannounced project is also in the works.



1 Scanning is important to learn more about the odd world. You can scan enemies you've killed, so putting them in the ground is actually helpful. **2** These strange monoliths might seem ominous but they also serve as checkpoints. **3** While you encounter plenty of hostile alien fauna in the wild, some creatures seem to be the result of bio-engineering.

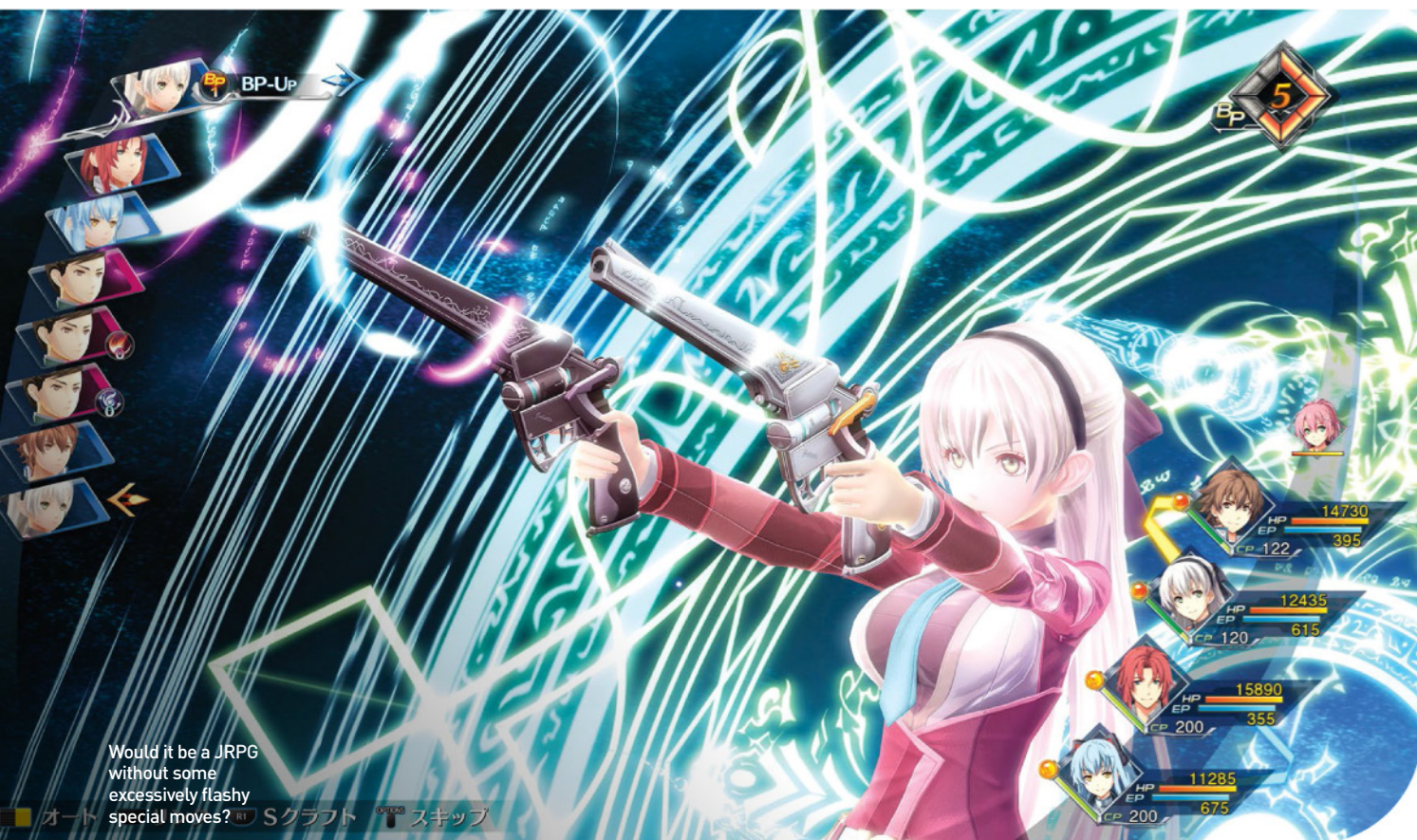




Hubris

Swimming would be more leisurely if it weren't for all the alien jellyfish threatening us.

i **FORMAT** PS5, PS4
ETA Q2 2023
PUB WALES INTERACTIVE



FORMAT PS4 / ETA SUMMER 2023 / PUB NIS AMERICA / DEV NIHON FALCOM / PLAYERS 1

The Legend Of Heroes: Trails Into Reverie

They think it's all over (it is now... sort of)

While The Legend Of Heroes: Trails Of Cold Steel tied off many threads in the huge, interconnected 'Trails' series, it did leave a few loose ends. Cue Trails Into Reverie, which acts as both an epilogue and a new beginning.

While Japan has already been treated to two sequels, we're only now gearing up for the English-language version of this first part. By the time Reverie's released here, both parts of the older PSP series will have been released in English. Which is just as well, as those games' Lloyd Bannings takes a starring role alongside Cold Steel's Rean Schwarzer and the mysterious masked 'C'.

All three scenarios play out alongside one another, and rather than wait for plot points to switch, you can change at any time with the new Crossroads system. There are plenty of side-chapters to explore as well.

TRAIL BLAZING

If you are expecting this to be smaller in scope than the massive fourth Cold Steel game, think again. Reverie

acts as an epilogue, with all that entails (the upcoming followup series, set in the kingdom of Calvard, takes a more back-to-basics approach). There are 50 playable characters across the three routes to allow for plenty of individual stories and party combinations.

Some of these characters are encountered through the True Reverie Corridor, which challenges you to beat randomly generated dungeons. While the

party-linking battle system from past games returns, new moves like United Front mean a well-tuned party can clear battles in just a few well-laid moves.

IMPRESSIONS

Celebrated for its density, this JRPG series is getting even larger, with a final hurrah for its beloved current cast.



1 The huge cast includes many fan faves. Picking who you want to fight alongside can be tough. **2** Once again, the city-state of Crossbell is at the centre of political turmoil.

"WE APPROACH THIS
PHYSICS-DRIVEN
PLAYGROUND WITH
CHILDLIKE WONDER."



Playing the ukulele is done via a chord wheel a bit like The Last Of Us Part II's guitar minigame.



PREVIEW

FORMAT PS5, PS4 / **ETA** SPRING 2023 / **PUB** AWACEB
DEV AWACEB / **PLAYERS** 1

Tchia

Having a tchill time in open world New Caledonia

We've been on many open world adventures where things have been less than rosy, the location being either a post-apocalyptic wasteland or taken over by brutal invaders, so it would be nice if we could have a virtual paradise to just, you know, chill out in for once. Tchia's New-Caledonia-inspired archipelago, then, might provide the tropical getaway we've been waiting for.

Not that these islands, home to the titular protagonist, are a complete paradise. Tchia's father has been abducted by the archipelago's tyrannical ruler, Meavora, who has also let his enchanted minions, called Maano, loose all over. Yet even though the stakes are high, we don't sense much of a threat level during our hands-on, as developer Awaceb is clearly going for a very relaxed vibe. Playing as a young girl from the village rather than some battle-hardened warrior, we approach this physics-driven playground with childlike wonder, delighting in exploring the islands.

Sure, there are some familiar staples: you're able to run, glide, and climb around as long as you've got enough stamina, which is measured by a timer (the build we're playing is extremely generous, so it may be more limited when you begin the game in the final release). But it's certainly the first time we've been able to climb a tree and

swing back on it, then, when it catapults us into the air, open our glider to keep going. As you can see, this playful sandbox is one that happily leaves realism at the door in order to give fun the run of the place.

The archipelago is unnamed as yet, but is heavily inspired by the real New Caledonia in the Pacific Ocean, evident from the environments, music, characters' clothing, and even the use of local voice actors, who speak in the territory's own language, Drehu. But it's also steeped in folklore and magical surrealism, which plays into one of Tchia's key mechanics.

FACTRICK

1. CHILL OUT

Pronounced 'Ah-Wah-Seb', the studio's name is New Caledonian slang for 'It's all good'.

2. WE'RE DROPPINGS

Flying as a soul-jumped bird is cool, but you can also poop on command too! Not sure if you can steal chips, though.

3. HOLIDAY SNAPS

You have a camera to take pictures with – but it's not digital, you have to develop your own film.

IN POSSESSION

When we press **LB**, Tchia enters Soul Jump mode, a state in which she can aim at anything within reach and then possess it when we squeeze **RB**. This works not just on animals but also inanimate objects (some cultures believe objects have souls), which we discover early on since the nearest things around us are rocks and a coconut that's fallen from a nearby palm tree.

It's more of a comical novelty being able to roll around on the ground as an object, though the developer steps in and teaches us another trick, which you might call a double jump. Because while a coconut doesn't have legs, we're still able to impart our own power to 'soul throw', flinging the nut into the air while punting Tchia out of it, also into the air. However, we can also quickly re-enter Soul Jump mode, taking

TRACK RECORD

Awaceb was founded by Phil Crifo and Thierry Boura, who both come from New Caledonia. The studio previously released 2D platformer Fossil Echo on PC, and Tchia is its first console game.



» advantage of the brief slow-down to recentre our aim, repossess the coconut and then soul throw it again before repeating. With practice, it's easy to use this tactic to reach immense heights.

The ability has been designed in a way to encourage you to improvise whenever something takes your fancy. You could be hurling yourself in the air but then spot a bird and decide to possess them instead so you can fly around freely, but then move on to a dog you see below, possessing a dolphin will allow you to explore the nearby sea much faster than you could in human form.

Limitless fun? Not quite. Tchia has a soul gauge (separate from her stamina meter) that gradually decreases while she's possessing something, so you do have some limits on how long you can hop around in animals and objects, though again, we find it fairly generous in our play session.

I GOT SOUL

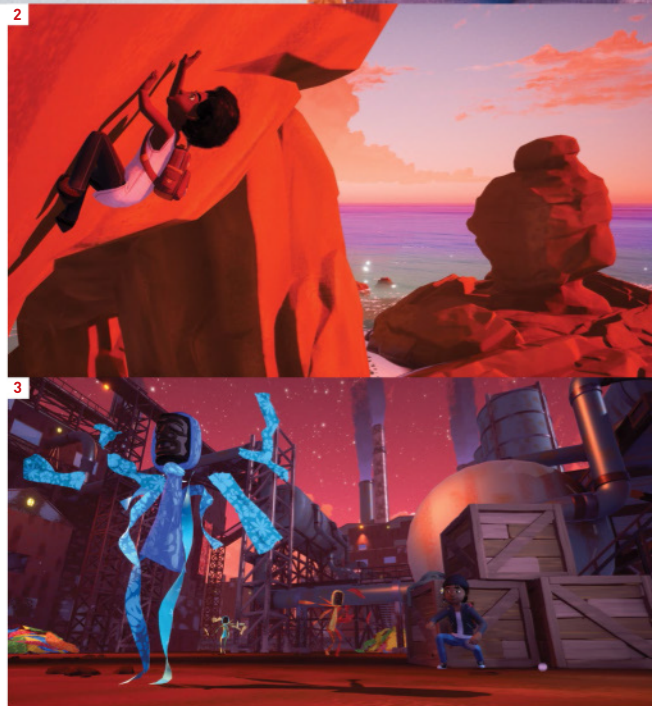
What isn't necessarily limited is what you can soul jump into. While some games might restrict your abilities to an immediate situation, for instance ensuring a turtle's nearby just when you

need to swim, we're able to pick up creatures and objects to place into our inventory and then bring them out when we want to make use their powers. The lantern we stow away, for example, is perfect when we eventually happen upon a group of Maano. We're able to take them out by hopping into it, then soul throwing it in their direction, reducing their fabric forms to cinders. Combat does break the tranquility of the game, though when these enemies are akin to the material scraps from *Tearaway* it's relatively harmless.

We're able to learn specific tunes to play on our ukulele, which can conjure creatures out of thin air whenever we need them. As useful as that is, this instrument is also great when you find a nice spot and simply want to pluck a few chords. We're guilty of spending a fair bit of our time with Tchia not even attempting to undertake any quests to drive the story forward, but then we suspect that's the point.

IMPRESSIONS

With its innovative soul jumping used playfully in a tropical physics-based sandbox brimming with New Caledonian culture, Tchia looks like an adventure that'll be more than just a brief getaway.



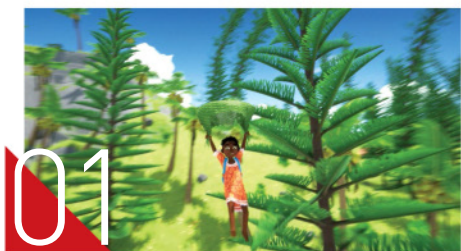
1 Rescuing Tchia's father is the core driver to the main story.

2 As long as you've got the stamina, you can climb pretty much everywhere. 3 Despite being made of fabric, the Maano manage to be quite intimidating. 4 Soul jumping into a bird is probably the easiest way to traverse the air.



Tropical travels

Ways to get around the archipelago



01

If you're at a high point on one of the islands, the best way to get somewhere else is to take off on your glider and let the wind carry you along.



02

As the islands are scattered across the beautiful blue sea at some distance from each other, a raft is one convenient way to sail between them.



03

Soul jumping into marine life can help you out underwater, though Tchia is herself a capable swimmer (but must manage an oxygen gauge).



FORMAT PS5, PS4 / ETA 2023 / PUB CAPCOM / DEV CAPCOM / PLAYERS 1-2

Street Fighter 6

Fusing old and new makes for a modern classic

Okay, round two: Kimberly (us) versus Ken (an enemy with a fun, if rude, PSN name). New versus old. How can we get the upper hand? We could throw a spray can a way behind him, then poke him in the hope that he'll back off into the can's explosion. We could use our dash attack, let it connect, then bounce back at him with a command grab. Or, perhaps, cancel out of that sprint at the last second for a low slide. It all sounds standard if you're familiar to fighting games. What's special here, though, is that players old and new are empowered to think in the same way.

FACTRICK

1. MIGHTY MORPHIN

Ryu and Chun-Li featured an early nod to some of Modern's ideas in Power Rangers: Battle For The Grid.

2. FACE OFF

In the pre-battle animation, you can change your fighter's facial expressions. It's a cute, expressive touch.

3. WORLD WARRIORS

The story mode, World Tour, is easily the most ambitious one any Street Fighter game has ever had.

We've spent hours taking on all-comers, and put plenty of time into both control modes – Capcom calls them 'Classic' and 'Modern'. The latter might be the best implementation of simplified controls we've seen in a fighting game, and could have a dramatic impact on SF6's lasting appeal. There's real depth to the Modern controls, enough to make us old heads at PLAY Towers (quarter-circles so ingrained in our muscle memories that accidental coffee spills are commonplace) struggle to access its power at first.

MODERN ART

Even so, we're more than aware that Street Fighter's traditional layout on a controller, with six buttons representing light, medium, and heavy punches and kicks, can definitely overwhelm newcomers, especially as it treats **1** and **2** as

essentially extra face buttons. Modern pares this right down, **3**, **4**, and **5** becoming both attacks, used situationally, while **6** is a one-tap shop for all your special moves, altered with a directional input, and holding **7** while you push out attacks will string them together into an auto-combo, ending in special attacks where appropriate.

Both input modes have plenty of tricks up their sleeve, all revolving around the Drive gauge, which will leave you with a 'burnt out' debuff should you overuse it. These are new twists on old favourites, from a parry (which can now be held down) to the Focus-like Drive Impacts that can smash through enemy attacks. All are easier to use and understand than ever. Too easy? Not at all. How you use those tools still matters, it's just that everyone gets a chance to think about the tactical elements of a fight, even when they're just starting out. Levelling the playing field means learning needn't feel as intimidating as the genre can often make it.

IMPRESSIONS

We're confident in Street Fighter 6's launch in a way we weren't for the series' last bout. Smart moves invite everyone to play, and could make SF6 the de facto fighting game for many, for good reason.



1 As ever, tweaks to Ken make him meaningfully different to Ryu. This time he's in hiding after being falsely accused of criminal conspiracy. **2** Eleven characters make the starting lineup – both old favourites and exciting newcomers are on the roster. **3** The Battle Hub replicates the Arcade experience, with none of the real-life awkwardness. **4** Extreme Battles challenge you to follow special rules, such as avoiding rampaging bulls. Well, these are street fights, after all...

TRACK RECORD

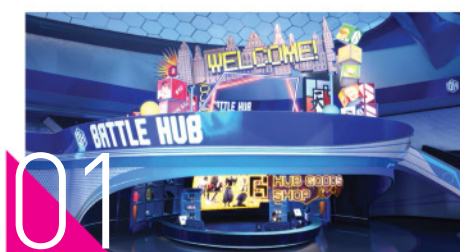
Capcom basically invented modern fighting games with Street Fighter 2 thanks to the accidentally implemented combo system. The series has had its ups and downs, but deserves to be central to the genre. SF6 looks set to keep it at the heart of things.



Fight nights



Some of the different ways to enjoy Street Fighter 6



The Battle Hub is a giant matchmaking lobby where you plonk down on arcade machines as your avatar to start matches (or browse the shop).



World Tour mode sees your custom character exploring Metro City, learning all sorts of nifty combat tricks from the Street Fighter characters.



The heat of battle. Whether you choose to play with Modern or Classic controls, you'll spend plenty of time clashing with human and AI fighters.



FORMAT PS5, PS4 / ETA 2 DEC / PUB KRAFTON / DEV STRIKING DISTANCE STUDIOS / PLAYERS 1

The Callisto Protocol

A zombie-infested prison? We predict a riot

We only review finished games, so in Viewpoint we go hands-on with near-final code of a game that just missed our review deadline. Taking on a level from the campaign, Dashiell Wood recounts the horrors of solitary confinement.



Things aren't looking good for us as Jacob Lee. Trapped in a collapsing correctional facility on Callisto, Jupiter's second-largest moon, a

deadly virus has transformed the prison population into an army of bloodthirsty mutants. Penned in by thick iron bars and the cold vacuum of space, a series of violent encounters stand between us and survival. No pressure.

The odds are not in our favour but, having escaped his cell and got his hands on a pistol and stun baton, it seems Jacob has begun to turn the tide by the time we pick things up at the start of the third chapter. Even so, it's clear from the outset that this is not going to be an experience for the faint-hearted. Death hangs in the air as we begin to creep towards the cold heart of the station, and the sickening smears of gore coating practically every surface suggest some time has already passed since the initial outbreak. Absolutely no punches are pulled in this department, and there's no shortage of disembodied limbs, bloody trails, and decomposing corpses to go around.

HOSTILE ENVIRONMENT

As we wind through the poorly lit maze of tight maintenance corridors and uncomfortably cramped rooms, it's hard to overstate the foreboding atmosphere created by Callisto's impressive audio design. The soundscape is subtle, dominated by low mechanical whirring, the eerie creaks of decaying metal structures, and occasional bouts of oppressive silence. It makes full use of PS5's enhanced 3D audio; there's a real sense of depth here and it's well worth getting your hands on a good-quality headset for the full experience.

However, true survival horror isn't built on anticipation alone, and when the zombie-like Biophages inevitably appear they do so in overwhelming force. There are several special enemy types to contend with across the campaign; we go toe-to-toe with two unique varieties: recently reanimated guards; and spider-like stalkers. While the former charge towards you, their thick set of body armour nearly impervious to your bullets, the latter take a stealthier approach, sticking to surfaces and lying in wait in a temporary state of invisibility.

Even a single regular Biophage is a formidable opponent thanks to its hefty health pool and powerful attacks, but as we make our way into the facility's sewer system in search of escape we are treated to attacks by groups of up to five at a time. Against such overwhelming odds, crowd control is key and this is where some of the less conventional tools at Jacob's disposal come to the fore.

JAMMY DODGER

Early on we are introduced to the GRP (or Grip), a gravity-gun-like kinetic device that we can use to manipulate both enemies and certain objects in the environment. It seems a little unnecessary at first, but careful use of the Grip very quickly becomes almost essential for survival. The ability to toss objects like explosive canisters towards groups of oncoming foes reduces the strain on our precious ammunition reserves and it's perfect for helping to maintain distance between us and enemies. Glimpses of a sizable upgrade tree at 3D-printer stations also suggest a considerable upgrade path to further improve its utility as you progress.

Melee combat is an absolute last resort, and a unique control scheme that maps Jacob's dodge to flicks of the left analogue stick makes it

particularly difficult to come out of close encounters unscathed. There's a certain rhythm to weaving around opponents (Jacob is more agile than he looks) but when health pickups are in such short supply it can become frustratingly difficult to experiment. It's a shame, as each new room feels like a puzzle box, a dense environment that forces you to think on your feet and explore a myriad murderous possibilities. Still, thanks to a forgiving save system there are few tangible penalties for failure – aside from having to start from scratch after watching a stomach-churning animation showcasing one of the many ways in which Jacob can have his skull caved in like a Creme Egg.

It's easy to see a handful of shared visual cues like the space setting, undead enemies, and Jacob's neck-mounted health bar, and incorrectly conclude that this is simply a slight remix of some of Dead Space's best bits. The comparisons seem almost inevitable, especially given the fact that developer Striking Distance is helmed by Dead Space's creator Glen Schofield. Nevertheless, there are plenty of interesting ideas in these combat dynamics that set this game apart from that earlier one.

VIEWPOINT

“CROWD-CONTROL COMBAT RESULTS IN SPACE SURVIVAL UNLIKE ANYTHING WE'VE EVER SEEN. IT HAS ROUGH EDGES, BUT WE'RE EXCITED TO SEE MORE.”

We'll have our full review of The Callisto Protocol in a future issue.



1 Our hands-on has us wading through sewage in the depths of the prison. And even down here there are Biophages to deal with. **2** By the time we begin our hands-on, the prison has already been overrun; we should see it as it happens in the final game. **3** Ammo is scarce, so it's important to time your shots and target enemies' weak spots. And note how Jacob's nifty neck implant provides an easy way to check his vitals on the go. **4** A face only a mother could love.

Team Ninja devs tell Alicia Haddick how they're bringing their 'masocore' combat to Ancient China in **Wo Long: Fallen Dynasty**

FORMAT PS5, PS4 / ETA 3 MAR / PUB KOEI TECMO
DEV TEAM NINJA / PLAYERS MULTI



WO LONG: FALLEN DYNASTY

WO LONG: FALLEN DYNASTY

Against the backdrop of history, a single warrior. Your custom avatar stands alone against soldiers and armies in the historical setting of second- and third-century

Ancient China, their task to quell the Yellow Turban Rebellion that threatens Chinese stability in the later years of the Han dynasty. Oh, and the warriors you face on the battlefield are assisted by supernatural demons and Chinese mythological beings.

Wait, what? After nearly three decades developing games set at various points in Japanese history and working with Marvel, Square Enix, and Nintendo in the past, with Wo Long Team Ninja has undertaken one of its most ambitious projects yet. For this, the studio's gazed across the ocean for the inspiration needed for a new kind of martial arts-infused game, swapping Ninja Gaiden's ninja and Nioh's samurai and yokai for the Three Kingdoms era and Chinese legends.

TRUE ROMANCE

At its core, Wo Long is an evolution of the 'mascore' genre the studio established with Nioh, in the form of a supernatural take on the Chinese civil war circa 184AD (which most people are familiar with through the 14th-century historical novel



1 You know the drill with character creators: build the ideal hero, or a demon-like creature so terrifying your enemies will flee on sight. **2** A range of weapon types at your disposal allow you to pick whichever is most suited to your playstyle. **3** This is China, but not as you know it, with stunning monuments of the era overtaken by otherworldly entities.

parent company Koei Tecmo has explored extensively in other series, from hack-and-slash warfare in Dynasty Warriors to battling of a more strategic variety in Romance Of The Three Kingdoms (based on the book). But this is the first time that Team Ninja has been able to put its own spin on it, despite the staff's appreciation of the beloved historical tales of the period.

Yasuda admits a big part of what led the team to tackle this period in history was their love of the era, and in his case in particular Mitsuteru Yokoyama's bestselling manga Sengokushi, which he enjoyed reading as a child. In addition to drawing on their own deep knowledge they've had the chance to reach out to the story teams from Koei Tecmo's other series to ask for

"WE WERE REALLY INTERESTED IN MAKING THIS AN ACTION GAME INCORPORATING CHINESE MARTIAL ARTS."

Romance Of The Three Kingdoms). The jump allowed the team to bring their skills to bear on a period and story they're fascinated with, as director Fumihiko Yasuda and producer Masaaki Yamagiwa explain to us as we go hands-on at the Tokyo Game Show.

"The Three Kingdoms and media related to it has been of interest to the team for a while," says Yasuda. Ancient China is a setting that

advice while finding their own take on Chinese history.

"While we've done Japan before with games like Nioh, we wanted to take a challenge with our own Three Kingdoms-era game," Yasuda says. "We were really interested in making this an action game incorporating Chinese martial arts. Instead of adding to the world of that game within Nioh or fundamentally changing it, we wanted to make



something different, and that's why we came up with Wo Long."

This comes across immediately when we start playing. An increased sense of speed is imbued into each weapon type to the point that each playstyle feels like a distinct



departure from the studio's previous work. The swordplay in *Wo Long* can be most closely compared to using the katana in *Nioh*, but that's not to say that the weapons even feel the same to wield, as the combat itself is quite different.

Like in *Nioh*, you can hold your attacks back until the right moment, or perform a well-timed parry. But the key in *Wo Long* is to stay on the offensive as much as possible. You never want to cease slashing and dodging. Rather than wait, you can kick an opponent back before slicing and dicing their body, then jump away with acrobatic flair before doing it all again from the side or behind. Tapping **○** allows you to parry almost any attack and dive into the fray to keep the action flowing, never letting up for a moment. It's incredibly fluid – you're able to dash away, jump from potential counters, and position yourself for another assault.

While all the weapons allow for that level of control while crossing blades, each has a different kind of combat flow. With dual swords your speed increases further, enabling you to break enemy guards through sheer perseverance. Long-range glaives allow you to poke soldiers and demons from a safe (well, *safer*) distance, with more rounded swipes and strikes that are best used with well-timed counters with their

strikes that deal more damage than any other weapon.

Considering you can combine these attacks with bows to poke and provoke enemies from a distance, and that you're able to use air combos to strike down or swipe at enemies from above and in the air, the possibilities for how you approach each scenario seem endless. That includes the route you take, too, as increased verticality means your hero can flip up sheer cliff-faces to explore the large levels.

FOE LONG

Sometimes you fight single enemies, but *Wo Long* has a lot of situations in which you fight groups of demons or soldiers, and this is where the combat comes into its own. Before long, mastery of combos will have you effortlessly pirouetting between multiple enemies, dealing damage and parrying with the grace and deadliness of a ballerina with a grudge to settle. It even opens the door to multiplayer co-op.

"*Nioh* was based around the idea of creating a game that had samurai action as the key point to its combat, »



The demo takes us through the Guiguguo Valley, a desolate area in the Taihang Mountains where rebels reside. After making our way over rope bridges and between rock

While these demonic opponents pose a threat, they're not the only

WO LONG: FALLEN DYNASTY



1 Beyond your main blade and pole weapons, bows offer a neat way to attack enemies from afar. **2** Divine Beasts are flashy finishers that can turn the tide of battle. **3** "It's over! I have the high ground!" – a quote Wo Long's inclusion of aerial combos will allow you to repeat frequently. **4** You won't have to face the Yellow Turban Revolution alone: friends can join you online.

» ones with supernatural powers. You can also use magic in battle to extend your combos and break down tougher enemies. These magical powers complement your martial arts repertoire, as you shoot streams of fire that can engulf an enemy, or infuse your sword with the sharpness of ice.

Elemental power is drawn from the Five Phases (based on the traditional Chinese philosophy concerning elements and their interactions with each other); infusing weapons and armour with this energy gives you the power to break through demons' resistance to mortal weaponry and approaches. Your ability to wield elemental powers increases over time as you raise your morale rank (earned by defeating enemies without dying on a stage-by-stage basis, just as your enemies may obtain resistance to certain elemental energies). Acting almost like a per-area level, your rank can hit a higher base level if you activate things like checkpoints,

raise the tempo of battle, qi reminds you of the need to step back and consider your approach, particularly against the most difficult foes.

Remaining on the offensive will charge your qi, allowing you to

"WHEN WE TALK ABOUT DEMONS WE'RE FOCUSING ON THE CHINESE SENSE OF THE WORD."

meaning simply exploring can help you conquer a mission.

You can also call upon the strength of Divine Beasts in the form of Chinese zodiac animals, who can unleash mighty strikes. However, if you want to let loose these powerful beings, you'll need to build your qi. If we think of martial arts as a way to

unleash a stronger attack that can stun bosses or mangle your opponents. It encourages you to avoid being passive while considering your enemy's strategy (it will charge only when your blows strike an opponent). In a similar manner, defensive parries cost qi. Play things too safe, and you'll be

left powerless to defend yourself. While Wo Long has no stamina meter, this almost pendulum-like qi gauge measures your momentum in combat, and you'll have to rid yourself of that negative energy to keep the pressure up.

When fighting the strongest demon foes, you need to consider everything in order to survive, never mind succeed. And don't think demons are only possessing or assuming the role of the strongest bosses you'll face. Even everyday soldiers will sometimes be subsumed with demonic energy.

"We've aimed for a strong balance between humanoid characters, as well as monsters and demons and spirits," says producer Masaaki Yamagiwa. "When we talk about demons we're focusing on the Chinese sense of the word, which is, of course, based on Chinese





mythology and folklore. For example, there may be humans who have amassed large amounts of evil qi and have become more demonic, and you have those which have existed since time immemorial.”

DARK ART

Wo Long’s Chinese setting is more than the indulgence of a childhood interest on the part of its creators. It’s a location that makes it possible to have fascinating, intense, bloody, and difficult combat and exploration in a unique historical and dark fantasy setting. It’s a blend of the best elements of both *Ninja Gaiden* and *Nioh* in many ways, and the result of 15 years of work for Team Ninja.

The question remains as to whether the team can deliver on this ambition. “We want to make sure we have an action game that players can enjoy and makes them feel like they’re really in China,” says Yasuda. “We want them to feel like they’re really experiencing this Three Kingdoms story through a darker fantasy lens, and one that makes them feel achievement in taking on hard enemies. [...] Making games is tough. Sometimes the final couple of months are most difficult because in many cases it’s the last chance to make the game that much better than it was, and the whole team wants to do what they can to make it a success.”

As you fight for survival, will the adrenaline rush of this demo be sustained as battles become even harder and more ambitious? That remains to be seen. But with Team Ninja at the helm, *Wo Long* is at least in safe hands until its release early next year, when everyone will finally have their chance to get a slice of the action. ■

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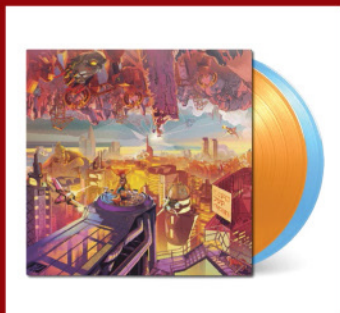
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CHRISTMAS GIFT GUIDE



TEAM PLAY'S CHRISTMAS GIFT GUIDE



Check out this year's festive loot drop

We're finally close to seeing the other side of what has been a particularly nasty boss of

a year. Soon, it'll be time to meet, eat, and sleep – and, if you can fit it into that packed schedule, give the gift of gaming. Team PLAY

have packed the following pages with treats for all gamer tastes, so stick with us for gift ideas for the whole squad.



HAND-PICKED HARDWARE

Why wait? Level up your gear this Christmas for an advantage all year round



01 BACKBONE ONE PLAYSTATION EDITION £99.99

No Vita? No problem! This iPhone controller is our pick for portable play. Modelled after the DualSense and fully compatible with your existing PS library through the Remote

Play app, this'll entertain you while you wait for Christmas dinner. playbackbone.com

02 EPOS H3PRO HYBRID £239

This flagship headset from EPOS (previously Sennheiser Communications) delivers top-of-the-line features, including a removable microphone, noise cancellation, and dual audio channels that let you listen to music while you play. We love the festive colours, but white and black versions are also available. eposaudio.com

03 WD BLACK SN850 NVME 1TB SSD FOR PS5 £179.99

Its small size doesn't make for the most impressive looking present under the tree, but this officially licensed drive offers plenty of storage. A built-in heatsink makes setting up hassle-free, but cheaper options are available if you're willing to fit your own (and forgo the LED lighting). westerndigital.com

04 DALJA ARCADE STICK FOR PLAYSTATION 5 £279.90

It's not for everyone, but fighting fans will

appreciate the features of this arcade-style pad. The complex button layout takes getting used to, but stops combo cramp. Its hefty design, created in collaboration with professional players, will make your setup look the part. nacongaming.com

05 RIG 800 PRO HEADSET £199.99

An excellent choice for the audiophile in your life, Rig's premium wireless headset comes equipped with a charging station out of the box. The same line also offers the more

cost-conscious 500 Pro (£79.99) and 300 HS (£29.99) if you're willing to sacrifice the base. riggaming.com

06 GOD OF WAR RAGNARÖK DUALSENSE WIRELESS CONTROLLER £64.99

With a striking blue-and-white design, this ice-cool limited-edition controller is the ideal companion for winter days. Inspired by our favourite father-son duo, the twin animal emblem is a classy addition that makes this pad the perfect pick for your Player Two. game.co.uk

CHRISTMAS GIFT GUIDE



+2 TO COOL Snazzy threads for the months ahead

01 RETURNAL SELENE JACKET £59.99

The festive period is often a loop of dashing around through inhospitable landscapes, searching for unique gifts that might make the road ahead slightly easier... this metaphor may have got away from us a bit, but what you can instead be sure of is the

striking white shadow of this windbreaker.
gear.eu.playstation.com

02 PSYCHONAUTS PSYCHIC AGENCY HOODIE \$69

The mind can be a tricky place – full of collectibles and challenging jumps. While it's best to leave their traversal to professional Psychonauts, there's nothing stopping you from throwing a comforting hoodie around the shoulders of a friend in need. Made from midweight fleece, it feels like a warm hug

outlined in striking green designs.
fangamer.com

03 PLAYSTATION TAPED-UP CROPPED HOODIE £52.96

Winter has come but milder spring days are ahead, and this cropped hoodie is the perfect layer for your new year fits. White to match the PS5's own curvy look, themed stripes offer a pop of colour.
gear.eu.playstation.com

04 RIVET STRIPE T-SHIRT £26.99

Shipping in January next year, you can

preorder this now to get ahead of spring (or whatever other nuts and bolts lie in your future). Rivet reaches across the rift for a spot of pocket embroidery in blue. Pairs nicely with your own back-mounted robot companion.
insertcoinclothing.com

05 OFFICIAL FALL GUYS CHRISTMAS JUMPER £34.99

Numskull has knocked it out of the park with its seasonal sweater offerings, allowing you to wear your Playstation faves on your sleeve. This colourful Fall Guys



number is perfect for fun, games, and flopping around this festive period. You can jump for the crown (or the turkey wishbone) in style as this leaves more muted offerings in the dust.
justgeek.com

06 THE LAST OF US PART II WASHINGTON LIBERATION FRONT BOMBER JACKET £83.99

There's a lot to say about Abby's arc through Part II – all of it pretty spoilerific. What's no surprise, though, is the understated but

fashionable silhouette of her outerwear. This bomber jacket is perhaps a bit light for trekking through a snowy post-apocalypse landscape but it'll see you to the other side of breezier nights.
gear.eu.playstation.com

07 METAL GEAR SOLID BLOODLINE LONG-SLEEVED SHIRT \$39

The festive period is a time for family in all its forms. Featuring a design that celebrates Big Boss and his terrible children, the long sleeves on this shirt may guard you

from a draught but they won't offer much cover in hostile territory. Better get crawling through those vents!
fangamer.com

08 KATAMARI DAMACY 'A CRIMSON ROSE AND A GIN TONIC' T-SHIRT \$32

All right, so you went out on the town and accidentally lost all of the stars in the sky – it happens! While you retrace your steps (or get a pint-sized relative to roll up some new celestial bodies for you), the charming design on this T-shirt makes it the

perfect garment for returning for another tour about town.
fangamer.com

09 SILENT HILL: SHATTERED MEMORIES SPLINTERED SANITY T-SHIRT \$32

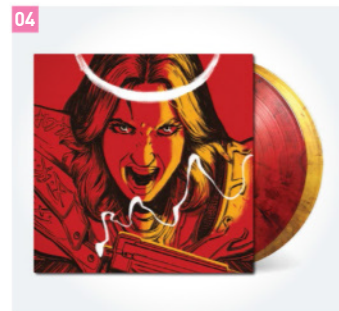
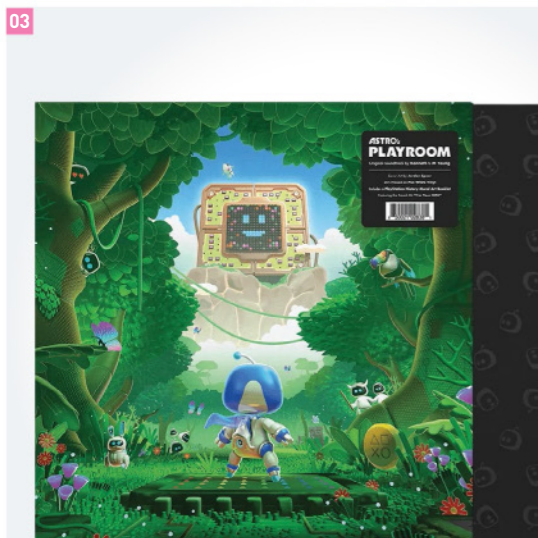
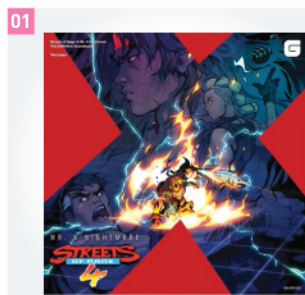
It may be a bad shout to try hiding from ghoulies while wearing a glow-in-the-dark T-shirt, but we can't resist this smashing design. In the light, we see Shattered Memories' reimagining of Harry Mason alongside one of the many monsters that haunt him. But in the dark, an icy outline

traces a moment frozen in time.
fangamer.com

10 FFXIV ENDWALKER PALADIN BOMBER JACKET £79.99

As seen on Naoki Yoshida himself in a recent Live Letter, this armour is equally balanced in terms of defence and style. A souvenir-style jacket made of polyester with blue stitched accents, it's unlikely to keep the chill off in Coerthas but you'll look undeniably cool wherever else your adventures take you.
insertcoinclimbing.com

CHRISTMAS GIFT GUIDE



DANCE, DANCE, DANCE

Vinylly some collectible gaming records to groove on down to

01 STREETS OF RAGE 4: MR. X NIGHTMARE THE DEFINITIVE SOUNDTRACK \$35
From retro-style composer Tee Lopes comes the bespoke soundtrack for Streets Of Rage 4's DLC. Building on the ground laid by original series

composer Yuzo Koshiro, Lopes brings his own twists and modern sounds to the brawler. All loud synth and big beats, it's the perfect accompaniment to smashing thugs around (and maybe a furious New Year tidy up). mondoshop.com

02 CHICORY: SOUNDS OF PICNIC PROVINCE €25
While art might be the focus of Chicory, Lena Raine's soundtrack creates a delightful mood canvas on which the story of self-expression and self-love

is painted. Combining calm, twinkly sounds with moody strings, it treads the line between the chill vibes and heavy introspection. This mix is a full suite, with tracks leading into one another. blackscreenrecords.com

03 ASTRO'S PLAYROOM SOUNDTRACK \$39
Whether you're tapping your toes to the hub of CPU Plaza or singing along with the electronic GPU who provides the catchy music to GPU Jungle, this PS5 launch game made the console

feel like the place to be. Along with the pair of white discs, you get a mural art booklet of PlayStation history. fangamer.com

04 BPM: BULLETS PER MINUTE (ORIGINAL SOUNDTRACK) €35
With action built around blasting to the beat, BPM's soundtrack needed to be a good 'un. Fortunately, it is. Electronic jams combine with gorgeous guitar licks to create an easy-listening yet bopping rock soundtrack. This limited print features two discs

with a marble finish in both red and orange with black highlights. blackscreenrecords.com

05 YAKUZA 0 (EXCLUSIVE EDITION SIX-LP SOUNDTRACK) £100
Commanding a high price, this is the definitive edition of a definitive Yakuza soundtrack. Whether it's hype vocal tracks like Reign, fight music like One Eyed Dancer, or music for simply hitting the town like Friday Night, Yakuza 0 weaves together true



Japanese ballads and arcadey fist-punching in one masterful package.
lacedrecords.co

06 GHOSTWIRE: TOKYO BOXSET £70

Mixing traditional Japanese instruments with electronic twists, this soundtrack perfectly captures the mood of the game in which ancient ghosts and demons invade modern-day Tokyo. Four galaxy-effect LPs are home to 60 tracks – all in a premium package with gorgeous artwork from the developers.
lacedrecords.co

07 RESIDENT EVIL VILLAGE ORIGINAL SOUNDTRACK £34.99

Evoking a suitably uneasy atmosphere, the soundtrack to the gothic nightmare that is Resident Evil Village is sure to excite horror fans. Aiming for a “dark fairy tale” vibe, the score succeeds at conveying the harrowing and horrifying situations Ethan must face. Across two LPs it paints the journey in full, including the creepy end credits vocal track Yearning For Dark Shadows from Aga Ujma.
zavvi.com

08 RATCHET & CLANK: RIFT APART (ORIGINAL SOUNDTRACK) £40

Perhaps PS5’s biggest, most bombastic space adventure has a soundtrack to match, with science-fiction synth perfectly scoring the off-kilter space quest. Thor: Ragnarok’s Mark Mothersbaugh collaborates with Wataru Hokoyama across this zappy affair. Yes, it even includes Emperor Nefarious’ delightful Disney-like villain song Join Me At The Top.
blackscreenrecords.com

READ 'EM, DON'T WEEP

The best words to beam into your brain with your eyes

01 THE ART OF GOD OF WAR RAGNARÖK DELUXE EDITION £116.99

With a faux-leather binding and a bundled “gallery-quality” lithograph, this celebration of Kratos’ latest outing is very extra. As well as being stuffed with fantastic artwork, there’s plenty of commentary on the designs. Should the price be a bit much, the regular hardcover edition is a more reasonable £44.99.
waterstones.com

02 A GUIDE TO JAPANESE ROLE-PLAYING GAMES £34.99

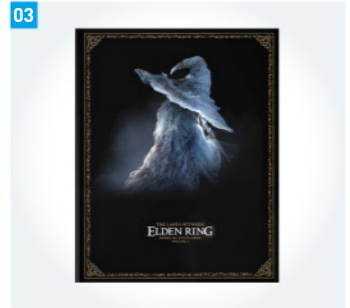
A must-have for any JRPG fan, this thick tome covers the history of the sub-genre from the 1980s to the present day. A lengthy introduction explains how the genre came to be, followed by detailed accounts of major and minor games and series, including some spin-offs and Western games influenced by them. With over 350,000 words, this is a hefty, great read.
bitmapbooks.com

03 ELDEN RING – BOOKS OF KNOWLEDGE VOL. 1 £39.99

More than strategy guides, this series of books is more like a complete chronicle of everything you’ll find in the Lands Between. Two volumes are available, though this first focuses on the world itself, from maps down to each NPC’s key dialogue. Any FromSoftware lore-head needs these.
store.bandainamcoent.eu

04 GAMESMASTER: THE ORAL HISTORY £30

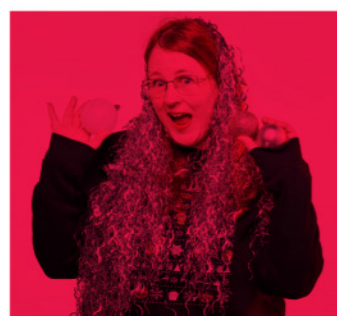
Whether you’re a long-time fan of the ‘90s UK videogame game show or you’re snooty about it, this lovingly compiled series of



accounts about the show’s production is endlessly fascinating. As you’d expect, this is focused on the original series rather than the recent revival and includes 40 perspectives from the show’s crew, all guided by host Dominik Diamond.
readonlymemory.vg



CHRISTMAS GIFT GUIDE



BACK TO BASE

Kit out your home with these cosy wares

01 OFFICIAL SONIC THE HEDGEHOG COUNTDOWN CHARACTER £59.99

Ah, nothing gets us feeling festive like a dismembered hedgehog! Macabre implications aside, this is a unique take on the advent calendar. Each

day grants you a new piece of the puzzle, and over the course of December you'll build your own suitably wintry Sonic The Hedgehog statuette – though we think they missed a trick by not having five goooooold rings. segashop.co.uk

02 THE LAST OF US PART II FLEECE BLANKET £49.94

Flaunting a red-and-orange plaid pattern that will perfectly tie together any rusting, post-apocalyptic living room or bedroom, this 100% polyester blanket

will survive the test of time. Faux lambswool fleecing makes this a wonderful warm companion for your next The Last Of Us replay. gear.eu.playstation.com

03 HOLLOW KNIGHT MINI FIGURINE \$10

You've heard of elf on the shelf; get ready for the knight fighting the blight. You can take this diddy silent protagonist home alone or as part of the full \$80 eight-piece collection that also includes pint-sized PVC figures of Hornet, Zote, and Cornifer the cartographer, as well as

others from the game. In what forgotten corner will you hide them? fangamer.com

04 ASTRO'S PLAYROOM ASTRO NENDOROID £74.99

Good Smile company has done it again, presenting an adorable, highly poseable rendition of everyone's favourite little robot, boasting a variety of props and interchangeable expressions so you can make him look just how you want. You can craft your own Playroom levels right on your

bookcase or mantelpiece. Available to preorder ahead of its February release, we've included official UK-based supplier Dekai Anime below but the Good Smile website lists a range of partner store options. dekaianime.com

05 SLY COOPER 20TH ANNIVERSARY PLUSH TBC

This official plush celebrates a big birthday for Sucker Punch Productions' premier heist-'em-up series. Sitting at nine inches tall with a



magnetically attached cane, Sly might as well be a plush Phantom Thief because he's definitely stolen our hearts.
fangamer.com

05 PLAYSTATION HERITAGE MUG £14.95
On a chilly winter morning, there's nothing better than a reinvigorating brew from your favourite mug. Boasting the bold colours of the classic PlayStation logo design, this stylish cup could be your go-to for health and mana potions alike. Face the day with your game face on!
gear.eu.playstation.com



07 THE LAST OF US PART II STONE COASTER SET - PACK OF 4 £19
So, let's say you've got all the mugs you could ever need - where are you putting them? Surely not straight on your furniture!? We don't care if it's the end of the world, there's no excuse for coffee ring stains. Each of these slate coasters depicts an iconic location from The Last Of Us Part II while leaving your furniture unscathed by crimes of caffeine.
gear.eu.playstation.com



SMALL BUT MIGHTY

Thoughtful treats for stuffing stockings - or your own pockets

01 HORIZON ZERO DAWN: OFFICIAL COLOURING BOOK £12.99

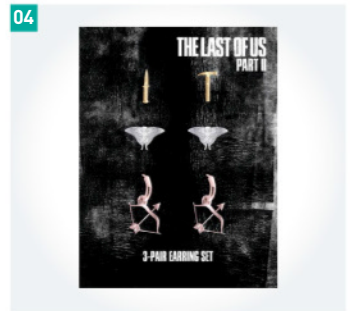
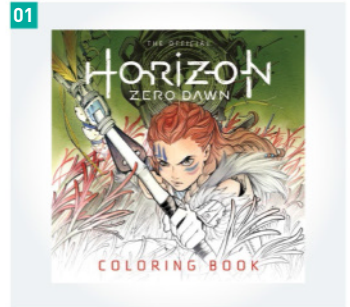
Featuring excellent line art by artist Ann Maulina, this colouring book contains impactful scenes from the tie-in comic book series. Without lettering or writing to worry about, it's up to you to play colourist. In addition to plenty of dramatic images of heroine Aloy, you can give fan favourites like Talanah and Erend a colourful makeover too.
forbiddenplanet.com

02 UNCHARTED TOP TRUMPS £4.99

We all know Chloe and Nadine are the best, but it doesn't hurt to back that up with cold, hard numbers. All of the usual suspects feature in this deck, boasting numbered ratings on every quality you'd expect of a good thief - plus a few top-secret facts. The hardy plastic case means you can take your cards with you into even the most remote ruin.
game.co.uk

03 OFFICIAL RYU GA GOTOKU / YAKUZA 'BOURBON AND SMOKE' UNISEX COLOGNE £29.99

Nothing says 'gangster with a heart of gold' like the aroma of aged oak and cedarwood, mixed with notes of pimento and leathery rose. [They sure aren't kidding about the smoke, either!] The scent of crime is presented in a bottle that'll make a tasteful addition to your bedside table, right before you smash it over the backs of any ne'er-do-wells.
segashop.co.uk



04 THE LAST OF US PART II EARRING SET £27

As soon as we saw the non-identical pairing of Ellie's switchblade and Abby's hammer, we knew we had to give these not-so-delicate little studs to the rough-tough survivor in our life, though we're also keen on the little bows. Each design features a combination of plated brass and alloy. Affixed with a post made from steel, you can be sure these won't get flung off in your next scrap with a Clicker.
gear.eu.playstation.com



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thebraintumourcharity.org

Reviews



"PRIORITISES
FAST-PACED
ARCADE ACTION."

96 Overwatch 2



068 God Of War Ragnarök

Don't worry, it's not the end of the world... oh!

HIGHLIGHTS

GOTHAM KNIGHTS 74 | NEW TALES FROM THE BORDERLANDS 78 | UNUSUAL FINDINGS 79 | A PLAGUE TALE: REQUIEM 80 | NO MORE HEROES III 82 | POTION PERMIT 83 | VALKYRIE ELYSIUM 83 | CALL OF DUTY: MODERN WARFARE II 84 | LEGO BRICKTALES 88 | ASTERIGOS: CURSE OF THE STARS 89 | SATURNALIA 90 | SIGNALIS 92

God Of War

Ragnarök

An over-realmingly godly PS5 gift



INFO

FORMAT PS5 (reviewed), PS4

PRICE £69.99
(PS5), £59.99 (PS4)

ETA Out now

PUB Sony

DEV Santa Monica
Studio

PLAYERS 1

LENGTH 25-35
hours

ACCESSIBILITY

Customisable subtitles; presets for vision, hearing, motion, and motor accessibility; screen reader (and audio cues); aim assist options; miniboss checkpoints; motion reduction; navigation and puzzle assists; visual and playstyle assists; controller remapping; in-depth control settings; high contrast display options; motion sensor aiming

Frost courses through Kratos' Leviathan Axe as we slice it through an enemy skull, then hurl it at an enemy across the combat arena. Sprinting, we tap **Ⓢ** to lash the Blades Of Chaos to a grapple point, propel ourselves over, and crash down with a smash. Summoning the axe to our hand we spin through surrounding enemies as Atreus rains down arrow fire. Weapons pulsing, we pull out the blades and set them alight, spinning to clear out more. God Of War Ragnarök is a bloody great time where you carve your own path to the goal.

Clearly Ragnarök is not a revolution. Rather, it's a refinement and very much a direct followup to 2018's soft reboot. The story continues Kratos and Atreus' journey through godhood in the harsh Norse pantheon, and both combat and exploration feel familiar – from punching chests to find gear to slicing through enemy flesh, it's like we never turned the console off at the end of the last quest.

While that does mean Ragnarök isn't a PS5 showstopper per se, it's still a mastercrafted experience, with more than a few surprises along the way to make it feel like a step forward. This is a gorgeous game whether you're playing on PS5 or PS4. PS5 can achieve 4K at either a steady 30fps or 40fps, or you can drop the resolution a tad for 60fps or higher with 120Hz sync (depending on your TV connection). The game defaults to favouring performance, and it's a beautiful, slick way to play.

Being an extremely enhanced endgame of what was possible on PS4 isn't necessarily a bad thing, and it feels just right for this followup. Blockbuster sequels can take so long to come out these days (five years in this case), that few developers seem willing to keep a good thing going. In some of its best moments, Ragnarök calls to mind the likes of Final Doom, Tomb Raider Gold, or Persona 2: Eternal Punishment – in other words, the team at Santa Monica Studio have simply grown very good at using their in-house tools to build sublime levels to carve flesh and crunch loot in, and by Helheim they're going to make them.

WINTER IS COMING

We join Kratos and Atreus years after we last saw them, surviving as best they can during Midgard's harsh Fimbulwinter and lying low in their

Kratos and Atreus have each other's back in a fight, but can they do the same for each other... *emotionally*?

■ While Kratos' violent combat is still the backbone of Ragnarök, Atreus comes into his own. ■



REVIEW PS5



Ragnarök is packed with huge-scale boss battles, many of which you discover on your own while exploring. Take on a dragon? You know ol' baldy can do it.



1



1 Atreus is handy in a fight on his own, and is quicker and better ranged than Kratos. 2 Knock 'em high, then knock 'em down. Kratos can juggle and batter enemies endlessly. 3 Thor has his own family to worry about. He's a threat, but even those you butt heads with are complex characters. 4 There are always more coming at you. But you get plenty of skills to help pick off enemies or group them up.

magically concealed cabin. The prophesied Ragnarök is on the way, and while their father/son relationship has matured (there's nary a 'boy!' here), the two butt heads over what they should do about the coming cataclysm. Kratos wants to stay out of the way to protect his son, whereas Atreus wants to take fate into his own hands as he continues to come into his Jotun powers, full of teen confidence that they can set things right.

But they have a leatherbound laundry list of things that could do with setting right, meaning Odin's noose (look it up) is only tightening around them. Vanir god Freya is out for their blood after the last game's climax, as is Thor. They're both hot on the trail of Kratos and Atreus, and while it takes a while for the wheels of fate to spin, the game starts in bombastic fashion as it rockets towards an inevitable climax (this ends the series' Norse saga). By the game's end, the gods do clash, though Ragnarök's structure can sometimes feel less focused than the specific 'reach the tallest mountain in the realms' goal of the first game. What results is a lengthy journey across the realms to find answers, and allies, to face the coming pantheocalypse.

THOR BLIMEY

Ragnarök wastes no time in showing you the threats snapping at the pair's heels. Quickly picking up from last game's tease of what lay ahead, Thor pays them a visit at home with Odin in tow. Every character in Ragnarök has depth, from the small to the large players. Just for a start, Ryan Hurst's stacked Thor is intimidating and reserved in equal measure, carrying himself with the confidence you'd expect of one of the strongest gods in the Nine Realms, and always looking for an excuse to prove his might. Richard Schiff's Odin is a revelation; an antithesis to Thor and Kratos, he oozes an easy-going charisma that slips into cult leader-like rhetoric, which feels like a perfect choice for the head of a pantheon.

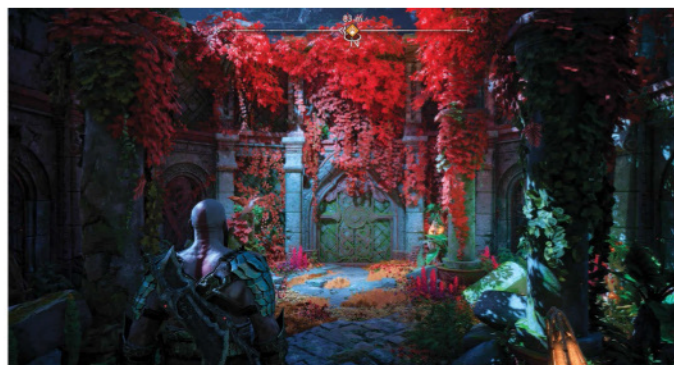
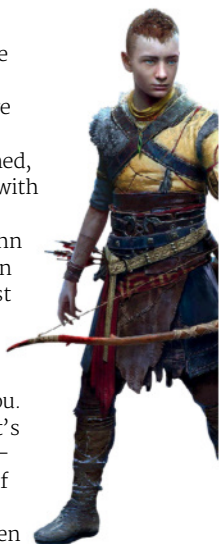
While a tussle of ice versus lightning ensues in spectacular fashion, showing a commitment to truly large-scale clashes with plenty of impact (when you mistime a dodge and Thor knocks you across the stage into a pillar, boy do you feel it), Thor and Odin are far from one-and-done bosses; the story never quite goes where you expect from this opening, twisting and turning delightfully throughout its lengthy runtime.

The members of the large supporting cast are great anchors throughout the long journey through the realms, each stage of the adventure spotlighting characters as you spend time with them. Few of the players here are thinly sketched, and all come together to paint a vibrant world with a history all its own. Whether it's Danielle Bisutti's pained and complex Freya or Adam John Harrington's fantastic turn as Sindri, tugging on the heartstrings as he tries to juggle what's best for his friends, most of the cast get some time to worm their way into your heart – even those you may take to be smaller players at first are given room to endear themselves to you.

A few do get the short end of the stick – that's perhaps unavoidable in a game this ambitious – and more could be done to dig into the plight of the common folk across the lands, who are otherwise mostly voiceless (a populated Dwarven

Kratos' and Atreus' father-son chemistry is off the charts.

Kratos' son, Atreus, is the beating heart of this story, and manages to carry it well.



The nine realms are seriously lush with detail, and each feels distinct.

settlement is quickly vacated as an alarm sounds as soon as you arrive, for instance).

Of course, Christopher Judge and Sunny Suljic steal the show as Kratos and Atreus, whose father-son chemistry is off the

charts. Judge packs nuance into every intonation and eye twitch, and plays the straight man to wonderful

effect (what's funnier than a well-timed, perfectly intonated 'no'?). Seeing the growth of Suljic as an actor is terrific, as he's the true heart of Ragnarök, and is given a complex role to match. Ultimately this is his story more than Kratos', who's here to support his son, and to grapple with what keeping him safe and helping him to flourish ultimately means.

STRING THEORY

Yet flourish Atreus does, even without the big man around. While Kratos' violent combat is still the backbone of Ragnarök, Atreus comes into his own as a playable character, striking out alone as the situation demands (and sometimes to his father's chagrin). While the tussling is from the same mould as Kratos', enemies and combat arenas being built the same, his focus on ranged combat rather than melee makes for a flow that feels different and more mobile. When he dodges his rolls are bigger, and his finishing moves often involve flips or knockbacks to create distance. In addition to the special arrows he has on cooldown even when commanded by Kratos (with Ⓒ when you're playing as the hulking Greek legend), Atreus can also fire regular arrows with Ⓐ, though both can be charged up. His skill trees aren't as fully

featured as Kratos' (you play as him less), but they do evolve. His sequences provide some welcome variety, and a neat alternative perspective to the big man we all know and love.

Kratos, meanwhile, has more than a few new combat tricks up his sleeve (or other item of clothing, depending on the gear you equip). This is still some of the best over-the-shoulder melee action you'll find, neatly adapting the gruff protagonist's character action roots. You start out with both the Leviathan Axe and Blades Of Chaos, and it can seem almost overwhelming at first, even though he doesn't retain skill upgrades between the games, but with more options for staying mobile the axe and dual swords complement each other brilliantly.

Tossing the axe and recalling it to Kratos' hand with Ⓐ feels as satisfying as ever, allowing you to summon it and leap into the fray with heavy charged attacks. The blades, meanwhile, are suited to slashes and twirls, perfect for tackling groups, and the chains that join the dual swords together can attach to enemies either to draw them close or to allow Kratos to dash over towards them. They can also be used to navigate the combat arenas, allowing you to grapple instantly across gaps or up ledges even when they're not equipped. You can quickly swap between weapons using the D-pad – hold the button down and you'll come out swinging with an attack after the change.

LETHAL WEAPON

It all adds up to combat that rarely lets up, where you always have options for what to do next. Dodge attacks mean you can keep swinging whether you're moving towards or away from foes. Signature moves are performed by holding down Ⓐ,



1
2



3

1 2018's GOW not large enough in scope for you? You'll have to go big before Kratos and son can go home. **2** Norse god of war Týr is the first new ally you make. Moments of downtime allow for warm character moments. **3** The Nine Realms are home to some wondrous sights as well as violent ones.

» which powers up the elemental possibilities of your weapons – the Blades Of Chaos' move has you mashing it to swirl them rapidly in front of you before cracking them like a whip, and the Leviathan Axe's stores a large charge attack (which can be cumbersome during a hectic battle). Combos are rewarded with the ability to temporarily power up your weapons, a neat trick that complements Kratos' Spartan Rages (which now include the likes of heals and specialised beatdowns).

A new third weapon is added to Kratos' arsenal partway through, and complements the others' playstyles. We won't spoil what it is, but as it's capable of making focused strikes and allows you to methodically plan followup attacks to activate later, it's a powerful tool that enables Kratos to make the battlefield his bloody canvas while also controlling legions of enemies. Use a skill enough and you can customise it, spending a smidgen of XP to tweak an icy floor smash to have, for example, increased stun damage or frost buildup.

You're never off the offensive for long. Kratos' shields have been overhauled, so you can customise roundels with special effects (as with

other gear), and also exchange the Guardian Shield for other variants, like a hulking Tower Shield that soaks damage if parrying with **1** isn't your thing (though it's delightfully crunchy and rhythmic to do so no matter the enemy size – Kratos can always go blow for blow). How Kratos rips bloody is in your hands, and everything can be tailored to play how you like, be that buffs from gear or the skills you use.

MAKING ENEMIES

The enemies taking those blows come in all shapes and sizes. The nine realms are now populated by a greater variety of foes – in fact, trolls, while present, are very few and far between. Often you'll need to identify particular behaviours to deal with them efficiently, starting with little frog creatures who can stick to a wall and spew poison before you knock them off, through to Asgardian soldiers who can perform their own dodges and strike you with

bifrost – a new element that deals chip damage which restores if you avoid taking a second hit.

The realms, too, are varied, and you do venture across all nine. Some are host to smaller adventures than others, but none are home solely to the likes of challenges rooms, even if some do start out that way. Returning realms have been overhauled; while you do briefly revisit the Light Temple in Alfheim, much of the area ripe for exploration is the arid deserts that lie beyond it, where the dark elves plan their resistance in caves.

This desert region is home to plentiful side-missions and collectibles to discover. Unlike the first game, where the Lake Of The Nine played sole host to many of the side-activities, here many realms feature hubs that are no less impressive and dense with things to do, often extending adventures with key companions in ways that feel meaningful. They can

■ How Kratos rips bloody is in your hands, and everything can be tailored to play how you like. ■



4 Stun an enemy and a tap of **RT** allows serious violence. 5 Multiple hub areas, including the frozen Lake Of Nine, host collectibles and side-quests. 6 Varied puzzles test Kratos' elemental powers. Going out of your way is rewarded.



sometimes feel like full-blown levels or dungeons. Some of the biggest moments of spectacle come from these, from facing down a fiery dragon to freeing trapped behemoths (it's not all murder – there are some really sweet moments).

MIDGARD MILE

There's a definite blurring of the line between what's optional and what's mandatory thanks to the high degree of polish. While there's the occasional 'find x' or 'clear camps' side-objective, the bulk of the side-content feels just as well-designed as that on the main path. Sometimes moreso, as some of the environmental challenges can push you a little harder if you have the option to walk away. In our playthrough one massive hub area, absolutely packed with

things to do, opened up through an innocuous side-quest right near the end of the game.

Even when on the main quest, almost every diversion to a chest feels like it has purpose, often rewarding you for going the extra mile while nosing around an environment or playing with a puzzle. A significant number of them trigger dialogue. Kratos, for instance, takes the moment to ask Mimir's opinion on something when Atreus is briefly out of earshot while you swing around on a crane, leading us to think 'Perhaps this was the main way to go after all?' But it isn't, it's just that no matter where you go or what you do, everything is made to matter, from the large story beats to your own adventure. It's the journey, not the destination, that's important.



It's no PS5 revolution, but it is one of the most finely crafted adventures we've ever played, mixing thrilling combat with fab storytelling. **Oscar Taylor-Kent**

10
PLAY

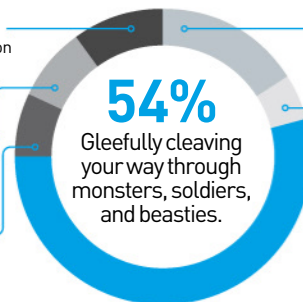
THE PLAYBOOK

WHAT YOU DO IN: GOW: RAGNARÖK

10% Snorting at the jokes. SungWon Cho's Ratatoskr is a hilarious high point.

8% Getting a bit weepy. There's some genuine tenderness here.

7% Being stopped. Some bosses are hard.



16% Spending extra time on a puzzle to grab as much treasure as possible.

5% Holding up your dropped jaw – there's so much here. And it is so good.

ALSO ON PLAYSTATION 4 PRO



While Ragnarök is a feast to play on PS5, it's ultimately a souped-up PS4 game rather than one equipped with a full stock of PS5 bells and whistles. Fortunately, that means it runs a treat on PS4 Pro, though the image is noticeably not quite as crisp.

HOW TO... GEAR UP EFFECTIVELY



Loot in God of War? Divisive for some, but it's here nonetheless. Yet all the armour is viable, even if it's a pain to get the materials to level it all up. Armour and weapon handles are all about buffing the way you play, so pay attention to what complements your particular strengths.

THE DUALSENSE DIFFERENCE

DUALSENSE SPEAKER

One sequence that sees you tracking down some witches introduces subtle chanting that builds atmosphere you might not immediately notice.



ADAPTIVE TRIGGERS

Adaptive triggers don't get in the way during combat, but add a clicky weight to some scenes that have you mashing scenery.

TROPHY CABINET



BRONZE

Begin to hone your godly powers by buying the first of many skills to come.



SILVER

Give sled-pulling wolves Speki and Svanna a pet during a side-quest.



GOLD

Kratos' new – and hopefully lasting – love: armour. Fully upgrade a set for this.

While you've got a team of four characters, the whole quartet's never out in the field at once.

Gotham Knights

Knight fever, Knight fever,
we know how to do it



INFO

FORMAT PS5

PRICE £64.99

ETA Out now

PUB Warner Bros Interactive

DEV WB Games
Montreal

PLAYERS 1 (offline)
2 (online – four-
player mode to
come)

LENGTH 17-20 hrs
(campaign)

ACCESSIBILITY
Change difficulty at any time; adjustable vibration; compass on/off; crime scene assist on/off; colourblind modes; customisable subtitles; text-to-speech; toggle or hold button options; adjustable trigger effects

Yes, Batman really is dead and, yes, it really is up to his extended Bat-family to watch over Gotham in his absence. It's a complicated adventure in some ways, not least because it soon becomes clear that the Arkham series is the Catwoman to this game's Batman; sometimes the object of its affections, sometimes its enemy... and, often, both.

It's very important to understand that this is *not* an Arkham game. Nonetheless, comparisons are inevitable, and the truth is that this rarely ends well for Gotham Knights (which doesn't do itself any favours by including a few abilities that mimic ones from the Rocksteady games). Nonetheless, after 45 to 60 minutes spent sulking that this isn't a new Arkham, something clicks for us, and we suddenly start enjoying the game properly.


Despite a team of four central characters, there's never more than one (solo) or two (co-op) heroes out bashing heads at any one time, and this further prevents the game from escaping Arkham's shadow. However, combined with subtly customised cutscenes, it also means that treating this as an offline game and sticking with one character is completely viable. If you want this to be a Nightwing game, or a Batgirl game, or a Red Hood game, or (for some reason) a Robin game, then Gotham Knights can deliver that for you.

That said, swapping characters (done at your hub, the Belfry, between missions) is always a valid option. This is a game with character levelling and gear crafting, neither of which, to be honest, really belong here. All four heroes do at least level up and unlock blueprints in sync, meaning that you never need to worry about grinding.

NIGHTWINGING IT

This is a very videogamey videogame; one of the biggest hurdles we had to leap over on the way to



A full-page background image of Batman in a red tactical suit with a white bat emblem on the chest and a black mask. He is in a dynamic, crouching pose on a grassy field at night. In the background, there are blurred city lights and a building. A glowing green sword is visible on the left side of the frame.

Combat never achieves the smooth and satisfying flow of Arkham's, but it's strong. ▶▶



1 A close-up enemy takedown signals that the area's clear and you're safe... for now. 2 Although the story never gets deep, the Knights have some fun lines when they're chatting. 3 The crime scene investigations are an interesting, cool idea. Unfortunately, they're also underused and underdeveloped.

enjoyment. Enemies have health bars, and numbers fly out of their heads when you hit them. There are loading screens, and pathways that refuse to open until you've heard the right dialogue. Something we still cringe over after 30-plus hours of play is that clues unlocking new crimes to be found in the open world burst out of defeated enemies like lentils of crime spilling from a bag of naughtiness. They're little *magnifying glasses*, for heaven's sake.

Oh, and that open world? The game would be better off without it. While Gotham is a character all of its own in the best Batman comics, here it's a little too Anytown USA, bland and peppered with the usual open world sins (scattered collectibles, repeated tasks, races, fast travel points that must be painstakingly unlocked, and so on). Getting around it isn't as fun as it should be either, with too much hopping around awkwardly on ledges as you try to dismount, or finding the next point for your grappling hook. Riding around on the Batcycle is... fine.

Yet each hero feels unique, and it's fun to swap between them. Nightwing is an athletic all-

rounder, Red Hood is the only one who makes extended use of ranged attacks viable (and he has the most brutal-looking takedowns), Robin has the edge on stealth and has some great crowd control moves to unlock; and Batgirl is the closest to Arkham's Batman (while still being very distinct) and can, eventually, self-revive.

YOU BATARANG?

Combat never achieves the smooth and satisfying flow of Arkham's, but it's strong enough to remain enjoyable throughout. The timing for bonus damage is unforgiving, and certain enemy types can and will interrupt you without warning. Nonetheless, each hit has weight, and the abilities you unlock have real bite. Powering through a group of enemies, especially once you start to overtake them in level, is satisfying. Stealth sadly isn't so successful, primarily due to your character's reluctance to dismount smoothly from

perches, or even shift from one ledge to another. Stick to ground level and silent takedowns aplenty can be successfully had.

It works as a solo adventure, but what of co-op? Well, adjustment of enemy difficulty and one player's stats aside, it's basically the same but, er, with two people. You can both be the same character if you want, you both earn XP, and you each get a Batcycle. If you join somebody's game for a mission you haven't yet reached yourself then, as long as you complete it, you'll have the option to skip it once you reach that point in your own game. When we play with a pal we do experience a few disconnections, but it is easy for the guest to get back in and rejoin the host, and in between those moments everything is perfectly smooth. Chatting with a friend while helping one another clear up Gotham's streets is, predictably perhaps, the most fun way to do it.

We don't know if the co-op team moves mentioned in

Chatting with a pal while helping one another clear up Gotham's streets is the most fun.

THE PLAYBOOK

WHAT YOU DO IN: GOTHAM KNIGHTS

26% Finishing an enemy off with a satisfying thwack of your staff/stick/whatever.

8% Getting interrupted in the middle of a combo, and sighing.

5% Trying (unsuccessfully) to swoop gracefully from a ledge.

35%

Punching and kicking people who almost certainly, probably, deserve it.

9% Crafting and equipping new gear, kind of wishing you didn't have to.

17% Wondering how on earth you unlock half of the cosmetics.

SECOND OPINION GOTHAM GUIDE



I feel less kindly towards Knights than Luke, yet I think we both agree that the game delivers enjoyment in spite of itself. Yet *always* in spite of itself. It feels like a scrapbook collection of half-finished ideas, most comfortable when it's as far away from Arkham as possible. To Luke's credit, the most fun I had was playing with him. Bash it out in co-op and you'll have a fun time. **Oscar Taylor-Kent**

STATPACK

40

The maximum character level. The initial cap is 30, but New Game+ increases it by 10 (and resets all your main and side story progress).

03

The number of optional villain stories to follow. It's disappointingly low, and Penguin isn't one of them, but they're a fun way to grind XP.

02

The number of times you get to see Bruce Wayne in his pants. If you're oddly keen, follow the Secret Identity activities for one instance.

MULTIPLAYER



If you don't have a friend to play with, Quick Play with a random person and their choice of mission is your only option (Heroic Assault is not available at time of writing). With no lobbies, you can't choose what you'll be doing or where.

TROPHY CABINET



BRONZE

Meet Mr Freeze for this. Not a spoiler, as he was a major part of the pre-release hype.



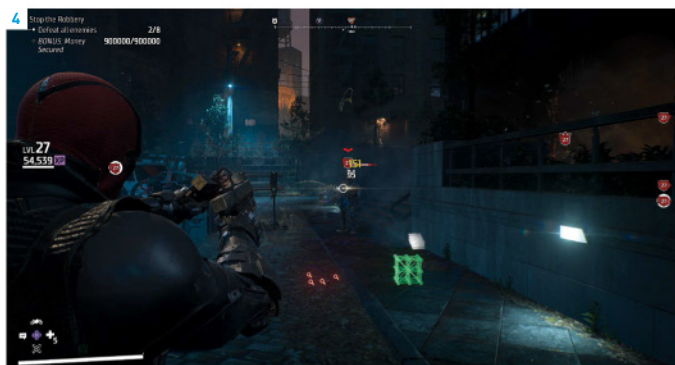
SILVER

Unlock every Momentum ability for any one character, and this trophy is yours.



GOLD

Prevent 250 crimes in Gotham City, which translates to a lot of repeated activities.



4 Red Hood can go wild with his guns – but with non-lethal bullets.

5 Co-op can make brawls easier, but there are no unique objectives or missions. 6 You can, for some reason, unlock colours for the Batcycle. Batman is spinning...



previews are in the final build. We never trigger any as we play, nor do we see any hint of their existence. This is one of many examples of the fact that a game is a conversation between the developer and the player, and this only becomes apparent when the developer goes quiet. There is *so much* that is poorly communicated. The way forward during campaign missions is not always clear, important information about combat is hidden away in optional tutorials, we often don't realise when we've unlocked something new, and villains' motivations are sometimes, quite frankly, absent entirely.

HARLEY TOUCHED YA

But. It's a good (though not great) Batman story, even without Batman. It's annoying

that story progression occasionally makes open world busywork compulsory, *but* this never takes too long, and we happily throw ourselves into what follows. It's a shame that set-pieces are the exception rather than the rule, *but* those set-pieces are worth waiting for. The elemental attacks, like so much, feel unnecessary but are fun to play around with. It's disappointing that the villain side-stories are fairly brief, *but* the interpretation of each of Batman's enemies here is great. The Talons in particular, once they appear, are suitably lithe and creepy, and Elias Toufexis is underused in his wonderful portrayal of Penguin. Though there are plenty of rough edges to scrape against, ultimately, we find ourselves grinning through (almost) all of it.



Don't expect a successor to Arkham, slavish to the memory of Rocksteady's games. This isn't that. It is a good game in its own right, despite some mistakes. **Luke Kemp**

6

PLAY



Anu, Octavio, Fran, and Lou13 could be a great team, but their greed gets in the way.

New Tales From The Borderlands

Where has the boom gone?



INFO

FORMAT PS5 (reviewed), PS4
PRICE £34.99
ETA Out now
PUB 2K
DEV Gearbox
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 10 hrs
ACCESSIBILITY Adjustable subtitle size/background and stick sensitivity; QTE difficulty settings and warnings; skippable minigames

Life on Promethea, the latest planet to be bled dry by warring corporations, is hard, but the three protagonists of *New Tales From The Borderlands* have learned to make the best of it. Anu, a scientist opposed to violence, by leaving for Atlas HQ. Her adopted brother Octavio by believing his big break is around the corner. Fran, a woman in her 50s in a hoverchair, by running her parents' frogurt shop.

Things are going well until the Tediore corporation invades Promethea to secure its Vault. Anu, Octavio, and Fran decide to take the Vault for themselves, and things spiral from there. *New Tales* poses an interesting question: what if things didn't end with finding a Vault? Unfortunately, while the dialogue feels natural and is expertly voiced (Anu's actress is a particular delight), the characters come across as rather one-note – Anu wants to achieve validation by saving the world, Octavio wants to be famous, and Fran has anger management problems (she also offers to sleep with anyone, making her the stalest joke for pansexual representation).

Where Telltale's original has plenty of action packed into its ten hours, here you see three people standing in rooms bickering through extended arguments. Even though you get the full game immediately, Gearbox has kept the episodic structure; at the end of each, you see your choices

as well as a teamwork rating. There is, however, no clear way to see how you influence this rating and how it contributes to the five possible endings. You also can't see how your choices stack up against other players.

STALE TALES

New Tales mostly abandons the light activity that featured in the original. On the default difficulty setting, you have enough time to ensure you never fail a quicktime event. Even if you do, the story often goes on as if nothing happened. That's nice in terms of accessibility, but it feels as if nothing you do matters. In the first few episodes, *New Tales* is genuinely funny – typical silly *Borderlands* humour mixed with critique of capitalism. Yes, you

will do unspeakable things to corpses, and there are excellent jokes about other gaming series and nerd behaviour (we love the Badass Superfan, a Tediore soldier who won't stop challenging you to Vaultlanders games).

Towards the later episodes however, jokes repeat ad nauseam. Standout characters, like dry-witted assassination bot Lou13 (Louie), the revenge for everyone who hated Loaderbot, or ex-Psycho Stapleface, feel a little hard done by towards the end, which speedruns through some entirely unearned character development for its heroes and abandons everyone else. *New Tales* can't strike a balance between plot and laughs, reminding us how good Telltale really was at telling stories.



Gearbox tries to recapture the magic of *Tales From The Borderlands*, but by abandoning its original motley crew and valuing jokes over story, it offers tame tales only. **Malindy Hetfeld**



INFO

FORMAT PS4 PRICE £15.99 ETA Out now
PUB Buka Entertainment DEV Epic Llama PLAYERS 1



Unusual Findings

The '80s are in fashion... still

Anyone with a bingo card of '80s references could get a full house easily with *Unusual Findings*: BMX bikes with flags, pop culture references aplenty, 'radical' vernacular, and old bulky technology give it a *Stranger Things* vibe. There's a lot borrowed from the Netflix hit and many '80s blockbusters besides in this tale of three teenage boys attempting to solve the mystery of an alien crash-landing in their small town, including the kooky bad boy and the disgruntled cops.

As this is a point-and-click adventure, you do a lot of picking up items and combining

retro pixel art and the throwback soundtrack which round out the package.

FLASH BACK

For better or worse, this feels like baby's first point-and-click, keeping the interactive options low and focusing on the story and dialogue. The latter attempts to walk a fine line between genuinely funny and toe-curlingly cringeworthy.

The setting – 1980s small-town America – hinders more than it helps. Everything feels pigeonholed or stereotypical, offering little in the way of original thought. The central three boys slot into 'confident kid', 'wild child', and 'nerd'. All

There's a lot borrowed from *Stranger Things* and many '80s blockbusters besides.

them with others or handing them to the right NPCs in order to progress. The story is sadly rather generic and strains under the weight of the countless familiar tropes being thrown in left and right.

A pleasant surprise is the fully voiced script – despite some uneven performances – and the accessibility of being able to press a button to highlight every interactive option in each area. There's also some beauty in the

are obsessed with comics, games, and girls. There's not a great deal that forces the game to break the mould, and if we break it down into its constituent parts, they're all done better elsewhere.

Unusual Findings is anything but, and while there are some nice additions, such as multiple endings and a short runtime for replayability, it won't set the world on fire or provide a memorable experience.



While there are some highlights in the visuals, sound, and accessibility, this never breaks free of its inspiration to do something interesting and fresh. **Daniel Lipscombe**

5

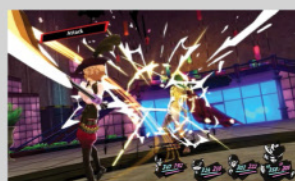
PLAY

THE UPGRADE

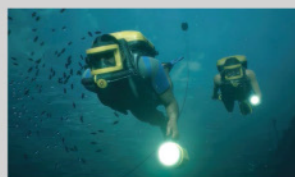
PS4-to-PS5 game updates chewed on



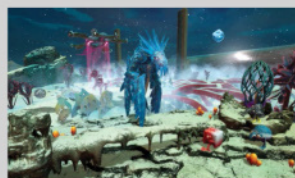
PS5 has been our favourite obelisk for some time now, but older titles are still making the jump from backwards-compatible to full-fat native ports that better utilise the power beneath that very large hood. Here are some of the best you might want to revisit this month.



First up is one of our favourite PS4 games, *Persona 5 Royal*. That was already an enhanced version of a cross-gen title that somewhat annoyingly didn't let you transfer your original save file. But, as this is the same edition, that should be fixed now, right? You'd expect so, but it's not the case. You'll need to start again (and with no upgrade path). Still, if you can look past that, this is a fantastic refresh, though an increased framerate in a turn-based game is only going to give you so much. We stand by the 10/10 we gave this on PS4, but there's no need to rake yourself over the coals if you have this on that console – it's a bit better here, but much the same.



If you're after an update that's far more generous, then look no further than the first two games in *The Dark Pictures Anthology*. The series' last-gen games have already received some nice patches (second game *Little Hope* in particular), but now they've been given a full overhaul with a free upgrade. Both feature faster walking speeds and new difficulty and accessibility options – and *Man Of Medan*, the first game, even includes a bonus ending chapter. As they're narrative horror games, the generosity here's almost putting us on edge, as though the rug is about to be pulled out from under us. But with the whole series now native on PS5, it's a great way to get in the mood for the imminent season finale, *The Devil In Me*.



The rather unusual *The Eternal Cylinder* also gets a free upgrade, though not for no reason. It comes alongside a big anniversary update which adds plenty of fresh content to the game plus the option to play in either 4K resolution or ray tracing mode. Two more creatures can be found in the tundra and desert biomes, adding extra risk, while there's an additional mutation available for your Trebuhn that allows it to shoot flames. If all that's not enough for you, DualSense features include haptic feedback and adaptive triggers to make surviving that giant cylinder's devastating steamrolling of your world more immersive than ever.

This huge swarm isn't even the most rats you'll see at once. Not even close.



A Plague Tale: Requiem

The worst of messes become successes; dark tales!

Fair warning – if you have a fear of rats, you should avoid this game like... well, you know. In an alternate-history 14th-century France, the Black Death is starting to devastate the country, but here it has a supernatural origin, and rats appear in numbers large enough to eat people in seconds and tear entire buildings apart.

The plague has arisen due to a family curse, the Prima Macula, which has manifested itself violently through a young boy named Hugo. The sequel to *A Plague Tale: Innocence* opens on the tail end of a period of peace, but before long the situation becomes worse than ever before. It once again falls to Hugo's sister Amicia to protect him and, indeed, the entire country.

Requiem will put a very special sort of smile on the faces of anybody who played and enjoyed *Innocence*. There's a tangible sense of a story and a developer allowed to spread their wings in tandem. Everything has been expanded from the first game. Story length, environment size and styles, variety of game mechanics... the world of *A Plague Tale* has truly blossomed.

PLAGUE ON WORDS

Despite the new setting, the south of France, being a prettier one, the grimdark heart of the game remains the same. Fire and light keep you safe



INFO

FORMAT PS5

PRICE £49.99

ETA Out now

PUB Focus

Entertainment

DEV Asobo Studio

PLAYERS 1

LENGTH 15-18 hrs

ACCESSIBILITY

Adjustable help frequency, difficulty, input sensitivity, and vibration; steady camera, aim assist, and automatic QTEs on/off; stick swap; customisable controls; invertable camera axes; invincibility against humans, motion blur, and subtitles on/off



from the rats; your best option is often to sneak past human enemies rather than confront them; and when you *do* need to fight, it's usually with a simple sling and an infinite supply of rocks (which are no good against helmeted soldiers).

You can still extinguish fires as well as light them, which is useful to remember considering that the omnipresent rats are as deadly to your enemies as they are to you. While Amicia will eventually get her hands on a crossbow, bolts for it are rare, ensuring the game never threatens to turn into a shoot-'em-up. More interesting is the introduction of tar (which becomes another type of craftable ammo). You can use it to create fire or temporarily

increase the brightness of an existing one. This is useful for carving a path through ravenous rats, blinding enemies who'd otherwise pose a threat, or both.

Combined with another element we won't spoil, it means you now have more options than ever before when it comes to making your way through enemy territory. This is great – but, despite the extended runtime, we feel a few too many things have been introduced. Crossbow bolts stick in wood, for example, meaning certain types of ammunition can be used to attract or dispel rats in your way. Amicia is rarely alone, and her companion at the time will often have a character-specific ability she can call upon. There are few opportunities to

Ultimately, the story and the telling of it are what gripped us from beginning to end.

THE PLAYBOOK

WHAT YOU DO IN: APT: REQUIEM

22% Listening to dialogue, and not begrudging a single syllable of it.

16% Sneaking around like a mediaeval Solid Snake (who knows alchemy).

9% Chuckling as you kill a guard with a well-aimed rock to the head.

27%

Gawping at the number of rats on screen, and wailing.

20% Starting a fire. Fire good! Fire keep Amicia out of rat bellies!

6% Using a workbench, and wishing you'd found more crafting materials.

THE DUALSENSE DIFFERENCE

HAPTIC FEEDBACK

Swinging Amicia's sling produces a gentle rhythmic thrum as it whirls through the air, ending with a jolt when she releases.

HAPTIC FEEDBACK

The destruction wrought by enormous waves of rats can be felt in your hands, making it even more terrifying. Thanks, Asobo!

HOW TO... UPGRADE YOUR GEAR



You can only do this at workbenches, unless you unlock the upgrade, er, upgrade. You'll need Tools and Pieces, which tend to be hidden in the large, harder-to-find chests. Therefore, you need to wander off the path whenever you see an opportunity if you want as many as possible.

3D AUDIO: SOUNDS OF THE FUTURE

Take advantage of 3D audio and the difference from the standard mix is immediately apparent. NPC dialogue is suddenly afforded a sense of distance and direction, while the roar of a nearby fire clearly grows louder as you approach.



IS IT BETTER THAN?



YES

The original Plague Tale remains a great game, but Requiem improves on it in almost every way.



NO

Sorry Asobo, but Arkane's Dishonored takes the crown for king of supernatural plague-em-ups.



YES

They share a plague backdrop and the music of Olivier Deriviere, but Vampyr is inferior by far.



An essential purchase if you enjoyed Innocence, and an imperfect but gripping starting point if you missed it. Hopefully not the end of the tale. **Luke Kemp**

8

PLAY



Loading times and performance are improved from its Nintendo release, although there's still conspicuous scenery pop-in.

No More Heroes III

This time it's universal



INFO

FORMAT PS5 (reviewed), PS4

PRICE £44.99

ETA Out now

PUB Marvelous Europe

DEV Grasshopper Manufacture

PLAYERS 1

LENGTH 15 hrs

ACCESSIBILITY Adjustable camera sensitivity; subtitles; blood on/off; choice of voice language (English, Japanese)

At the heart of *No More Heroes* there's always been a grungy anarchism. Whether it's in Travis Touchdown's reckless fighting style, the comically violent plot twists, or a collage of cult media references, the series resists formulaic polish. And *No More Heroes III* doesn't buck the trend, plastering the screen with sprays of blood and inspiration. At least, that is, on the surface – underneath it feels like it's treading water.

The stakes are raised this time as Travis has to prove he's the greatest assassin in not just the world but the whole galaxy. A cartel of megalomaniac aliens arrives in town and the beam-sword-wielding antihero must battle each to the death in turn, inching up the ranks until he can take on supreme overlord Fu. Fortunately, Travis remains as defiant, arrogant, and oblivious as he was 15 years ago, as it's precisely that attitude that gives him a chance.

Structurally not much has changed. To access a boss fight you have to pay an entrance fee, which means winning 'designated' matches against lesser enemies and completing odd jobs around a small open world map. In practice, the jobs (from mowing lawns to a cannon defence game) are largely optional, which is a relief since none is more than a throwaway distraction. Minor battles are more compelling – a handy introduction to the kinetic combat, which is boosted by Travis' gusto, and tactical elements which force you to earn openings before getting stuck in. Ultimately, though, these also become repetitive, and are marred by a camera

that pulls in too close, plus a terrible decision to swap the A and B button mappings from previous versions so jump and dodge commands are now the wrong way round and can't be changed.

MIIKE MAGIC

No More Heroes III does still come to life in its boss battles

As for the bosses, some provide classic challenges, while others shift expectations, throwing you into traditional RPG mechanics, for instance, or offering you a game of musical chairs. Not all these sequences land, but they're always amusingly imaginative.

Even then, however, there's no real sense that this geek

Minor battles are a handy introduction to the kinetic combat, boosted by Travis' gusto.

and stream of fourth-wall-breaking multimedia cameos. The tone is set as the game begins as a 2D scrolling beat-'em-up, then proceeds into a Ghibli-style anime sequence, and the end of each chapter features Travis and his pal chilling on the couch, discussing the work of cult Japanese director Takashi Miike.

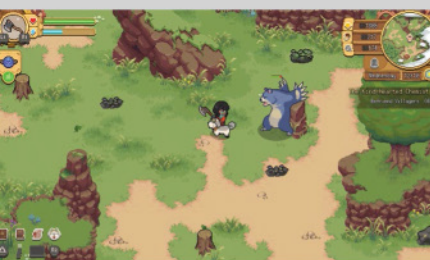
culture-hopping amounts to anything more substantial than fanboy indulgence. So while Travis himself remains entertainingly bolshy, and his latest star vehicle is pleasingly eclectic, *No More Heroes'* rebellious style has only become more superficial, and the core experience has failed to evolve.



A delicious stream-of-consciousness journey into geek culture is underpinned by solid combat, but undermined by filler, rough edges, and a void of meaningful cohesion. **Jon Bailes**



INFO **FORMAT** PS5 (rev), PS4 **PRICE** £15.99
ETA Out now **PUB** PQube
DEV Massive Media **PLAYERS** 1



Potion Permit

Quite the concoction

Moonbury's local witchdoctor is unable to help the mayor's daughter, so you've been recruited to find a cure. As the previous chemist from the city caused quite the incident, the townsfolk aren't exactly rolling out the red carpet for you, but on the flipside you've got the keys to the potion house and a cute, trusty pooch as a sidekick.¹

Aiding residents is your top priority in this sweet game, and as soon as the clinic's emergency alarm sounds, it's time for a few minigames to help you diagnose the patients. You'll determine what's the best antidote for Yorn's bad knee in next to no time. However, the cauldron back at your humble abode isn't going to boil up remedies all by itself.

After grabbing some tools, it's time to head off to Meadow Grange, the first of three unlockable sections of the map where you can forage for supplies. With some items and now-slain inhabitants² you'll be able to formulate a plethora of potions. Although Moonbury's map isn't huge, discovering and using fast travel portals saves you a lot of time when undertaking quests or heading home for a snooze post-scanvenger.

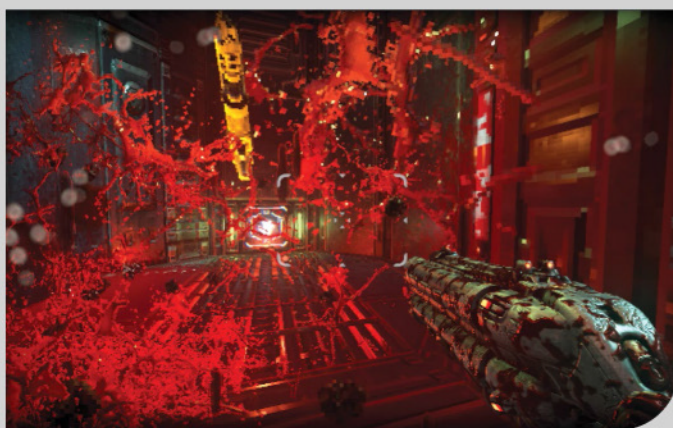
This RPG takes a more relaxed approach than its peers, but it's easy to fall victim to the 'five more minutes' style of play. Surprisingly, tasks that appear repetitive aren't at all. With tool upgrades allowing faster foraging or part-time jobs and tasks built around helping the community, there's plenty to keep pulling you back in.

In addition to its cast of quirky characters and whimsy, Moonbury's colourful pixelated setting is a joy to wander around. If you enjoy a farmer's life in Stardew Valley, Potion Permit is guaranteed to brew the right remedy. **Vic Phaseay**

8
PLAY

FOOTNOTES 1 After your dog leads you to NPCs, a mushroom and some fuses make a good reward.
 2 It's no teddy bear's picnic down in the woods today.

INFO **FORMAT** PS5 (rev), PS4 **PRICE** £19.99
ETA Out now **PUB** Humble Games
DEV Bounding Box Software **PLAYERS** 1-16



Prodeus

The eternal recurrence

Fast-paced and brutal, this looks like it came out in the '90s. If it walks like a duck, and Quakes like a Doom, it's a boomer shooter.¹

Prodeus sets out to be the version of Doom 3 we never got, and to that end it succeeds par excellence. All the hallmarks are present: twisty levels; coloured keys; and running backwards at full tilt screaming at the approaching horde. The sprite animation looks fantastic, and each weapon feels meaty and fun to use, despite the clunky way you switch between them.

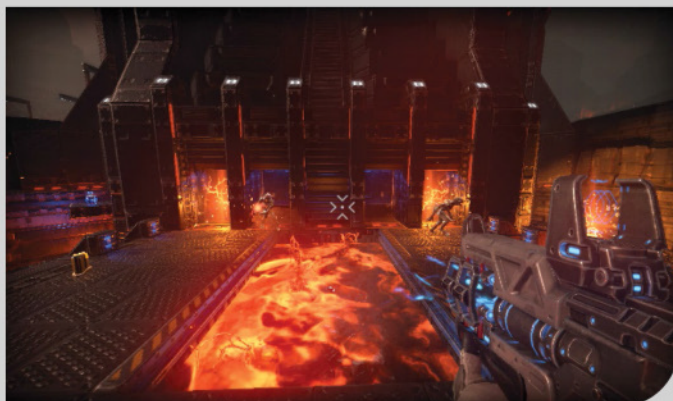
The developers' talent is clear, but Prodeus struggles to establish an identity beyond that of its forebear; most of the campaign's 30-ish stages take place somewhere that looks like Mars.² The few enemy archetypes present are recognisably demonic for the

most part, and the soundtrack is instantly familiar – all chuggy metal when it hits the proverbial fan. One crucial misstep, however, is the checkpoint system; you respawn in the part of the level that you died in, meaning there's no penalty for death. Even at the highest difficulties, Prodeus is far less challenging as a result. The decidedly retro level select map was also a surprising touch for a game without much narrative to speak of.

Nietzsche spoke of the idea that all existence and energy will continue to recur in a self-similar form infinitely. And now we get why: he was definitely a Doom fan. The game continues to loom large over those it's inspired. While Prodeus is certainly one of the best, its genre is one that's beginning to exalt less and less.

Dan Solomon

6
PLAY



FOOTNOTES 1 For the uninitiated, yes, it's a real subgenre, which people used to refer to as 'Doom clones'. That's actually more accurate; Boomers probably didn't play Doom back in the day... 2 The handful of other destinations you visit and slaughter demons in will come as no great surprise, either. Talk about déjà vu.

INFO **FORMAT** PS5 (rev), PS4 **PRICE** £54.99
ETA Out now **PUB** Square Enix
DEV Soleil, Square Enix **PLAYERS** 1



Valkyrie Elysium

Norse for wear

Borrowing Edda-obsessed cues from its older RPG siblings, this Valkyrie spin-off strikes out on its own with a focus on action. As Midgard teeters on a precipice, Odin sends out a new warrior maiden¹ in search of allies scattered through time, and perhaps even a way to save the dying world.

But rather than feeling atmospheric, Midgard's emptiness strikes a lifeless chord – and we're not just talking about the restless undead. Your primary preoccupation is 'purifying' these petulant souls along with gnarly bosses known as Naglfar. Between trading sword strikes and popping off elemental spells, you can summon spectral warriors known as Einherjar to your aid in the heat of battle.

Grappling between enemies before firing an arc of lightning that snakes through each member of the opposition, we glimpse the action the combat aspires to be but it's normally nowhere near as slick. Still, hammering on elemental weaknesses and switching weapons on the fly remains satisfying. Unfortunately, outside fights there's little to write home about. There's a lot of downtime between bustups but the world is sparse, with what came before only hinted at through side-quests and unusually chatty blue figures echoing the past for your character. As for your party, they are much less interesting outside of combat. While each warrior hailing from a different era boasts an appealing design, they're lacking personality.²

It's hard to ignore this spin-off's squandered potential – or the deafening silence of Midgard. While we have great fun mixing and matching a wealth of combat options, we can't recommend it based on that single verse when this game boasts an epic poem's price tag.

Jess Kinghorn

6
PLAY

FOOTNOTES 1 Simply called 'Valkyrie,' she endears with her grumpiness. 2 Cutscenes are charmless, avoiding showing characters' mouths moving.

Call Of Duty: Modern Warfare II

The modernisation's a success, but the story pays a Price



INFO

FORMAT PS5 (reviewed), PS4

PRICE £69.99-£99.99

ETA Out now

PUB Activision

DEV Infinity Ward

PLAYERS 1

LENGTH 6-8 hrs

ACCESSIBILITY Closed captions; colourblind filters

Russian mercenaries, Iranian terrorists, and a Mexican drug cartel walk into a bar. It sounds like the set-up to a bad joke, but there's nothing tongue-in-cheek about the portrayal of these disparate elements in Modern Warfare II's story campaign (we'll be taking a deeper look at the multiplayer next issue once we've had more time with it). Even so, if you can overlook a clumsy plot punctuated by a handful of particularly uncomfortable moments, a sequence of stellar set-pieces makes for an action blockbuster without equal.

While the story of 2019's Modern Warfare was far from perfect, it set a high bar for presenting a grounded narrative. The developers sensibly opted to set the action in a largely fictionalised locale, interspersing the array of shooting galleries with more sombre sections told from a civilian perspective. For a series so heavily invested in the glamorisation of real-world violence, it offered a refreshingly weighty examination of the more horrific side of modern combat.

Although it's understandable that things were taken in a different direction for Cold War and Vanguard (entirely separate studios created these two most recent entries) it's disappointing that this mature tone is nowhere to be found in Modern Warfare's direct sequel.

SOAP OPERA


Instead, a straightforward setup involving missing American missiles spirals into a convoluted tale of conspiracy and international smuggling that begins to feel like it was assembled at random using a dartboard of overwrought action movie clichés.

There are no surprises here. Everything from the stereotypical cartel antagonists to the inevitable betrayal midway through the campaign is predictable, never going beyond the most



We hope you're here for the action, because if you're after a meaty story, this isn't it.





It's no exaggeration to say that the moment-to-moment action has never felt better.



1
2



1 Prepare to get moist. Missions take advantage of new swimming mechanics. 2 Firefights like this have never felt (or looked) better. 3 Brilliant character animation elevates the cliché-ridden cutscenes.

» surface-level Hollywood stereotypes. Not even the consistently impressive cutscene animation and superb vocal performances can imbue any sense of subtlety in a script which literally has one of the central antagonists turn to camera and justify their motivations by saying that “as long as there is a war on terror, there will be no real war on drugs.”

There are still satisfying character moments when it comes to the interactions between the members of Task Force 141, though, especially regarding their dealings with Alejandro Vargas. The leader of a Mexican special forces unit, Vargas makes a surprisingly natural addition to the team and it’s enjoyable to see the shift in dynamic as the two groups learn to work together. However, it’s hard to shake the strange dissonance between the constant light-hearted quipping and missions that ask you to level entire Mexican villages (including at least one school) via drone strike.

One particularly egregious scene early on has you holding **[R]** to point loaded weapons at terrified civilians after breaking into their homes in the night. There’s very little self-awareness here, underscored by the almost comical labelling of this

action as a “de-escalation” on your objective marker. Previous campaigns had their fair share of controversial moments, but this feels far too reminiscent of the now infamous ‘Hold **[R]** to Pay Respects’ gaffe; it beggars belief to see the same mistakes repeated almost a decade later.

CLEAN HOUSE

Lessons have at least been learned when it comes to avoiding repeating the pitfalls that dominated Vanguard’s formulaic campaign. Outside of cutscenes and more linear scripted sequences, it’s no exaggeration to say that the moment-to-moment action has never felt better. The opening mission alone draws inspiration from several of the last campaign’s heights, mixing the tense room clearing of the London townhouse raid with night-time combat reminiscent of later sections in Urzikstan.

In fact, each of the 17 missions presents its own surprisingly radical reinvention

of the Call Of Duty formula. The introduction of swimming leads to several engaging firefights across aquatic environments, while a surprising dash of survival crafting challenges you to think on your feet and use your environment to survive. The inspiration taken from other series is clear to see – one memorable Hitman-like level has you donning disguises to stealthily blend in at a crowded cartel villa.

Everything now operates on a much larger scale, emphasised by a subsequent section that practically remakes 2007’s legendary stealth-oriented outing All Ghillied Up with a renewed emphasis on player choice. For a brief time, an entire open world island populated by baddies is at your fingertips, along with the tools to pursue several distinct approaches to fulfilling your objectives. As a result, the best moments in Modern Warfare II are ripe for subsequent replays and, hopefully, a promising

Each of the 17 missions presents its own radical reinvention of the COD formula.



4 You're treated to a barrage of beautiful vistas when the action moves to Mexico.

5 Crafting mechanics are unexpected, but not unwelcome. **6** A brief detour to Amsterdam showcases PS5's graphical power.



indication of the possibilities for campaigns to come.

There are a few noticeable sore spots – one overly long and repetitive driving segment comes to mind – but, on the whole, new mechanics are introduced, used, and then discarded before they begin to overstay their welcome. Rock-solid performance accompanies the blistering pace, and framerates are flawless in even the most intricately detailed scenes.

ON TARGET

The introduction of armoured enemies, equipped with either riot shields or heavy helmets that can withstand multiple hits, is more of a mixed bag. On one hand it forces you to adapt and make the most of your improvised arsenal by hanging on to the powerful armour-

piercing weapons foes drop occasionally. On the other hand their sudden arrival can prove a recipe for frustration on higher difficulties, where it's already harder to maintain the ammo reserves required to defend yourself in tight situations.

Fortunately, the core gunplay is more refined than ever and taking on even the sponginess of enemies feels good. Excellent haptic feedback lends every shot a serious sense of weight and full use of the DualSense's adaptive triggers helps each new weapon stand out from the crowd. Whether you enjoy shotguns, rifles, or sidearm pistols it's punchy, satisfying, and finely polished. If nothing else, the strong shooting, alongside the suite of new action elements, makes this a purely mechanical step forward for the series.



The best gunplay in the series struggles in the face of a poor plot. What you do in the campaign is nicely varied enough, but there's very little substance. **Dashiell Wood**



THE PLAYBOOK

WHAT YOU DO IN: MODERN WARFARE II

18% Watching Task Force 141 work together as a team.

17% Wishing the story was treated with a little more sensitivity.

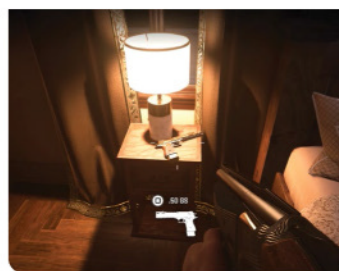
12% Scavenging materials and crafting improvised survival gear.

30%
Getting to grips with the new mechanics.

20% Soaking in the sights of the many spectacular international locations.

3% Wondering just what Ghost is hiding underneath his mask.

HOW TO... FIND GOLDEN GUNS



Pay attention in the 11th mission. After you infiltrate the mansion, keep an eye out for the building's armoury. On its wall is a rack of gold-plated Kastov 762 rifles. Similarly, a snazzy customised Desert Eagle can be snagged from the bedside table in the master bedroom.

SECOND OPINION SERIES VETERAN



While there are missions that feel like ticking boxes on a checklist, the campaign offers enough interesting new mechanics to make this feel like the freshest COD campaign for some time. Some levels, such as the convoy section, do outstay their welcome but they're interspersed with some great set-pieces and changes in pacing to ensure Modern Warfare II never feels stale. **Milford Coppock**

MULTIPLAYER



Extensive weapon customisation and a good selection of maps makes for some of the most exciting multiplayer skirmishes we've seen in years. Ground War, a larger-scale deathmatch, is a solid addition and the new PvE raids mean there's plenty of content to sink your teeth into.

IS IT BETTER THAN?



YES

Vanguard's underwhelming campaign suffered for sticking too closely to the COD formula.



NO

The recent campaign remaster shows that the more complex plot of the original MW2 still holds up today.

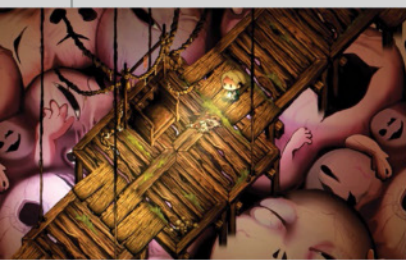


YES

Better gunplay and a package that includes a single-player campaign put Modern Warfare II above 2042.

REVIEW

INFO **FORMAT** PS4 **PRICE** £34.99
ETA Out now **PUB** NIS America
DEV Nippon Ichi **PLAYERS** 1



Yomawari: Lost In The Dark

Lost, alone, and terrified

What if Studio Ghibli made Silent Hill? Doesn't that sound like a weirdly tempting nightmare? That's the vibe Yomawari: Lost In The Dark gives off. The third in the series, it continues the tradition of painterly visuals, cute chibi characters, and loads of sneaking around to avoid folklore-inspired spirits one-shotting you.

The game is relentless about killing you, and you'll find yourself memorising steps like some kind of horrible dance, especially in the 'dungeon' areas. That doesn't mean you won't also be crushed to death by a woman falling out of nowhere in town. Or by examining a curious object and accidentally summoning the murder chicken. Everything takes joy in painting the town red – with you as the paint.

You have one night to recover your missing memories in order to break a foreboding though unspecified curse. By finding different items, you can peek into your past to try to piece this whole mess together. This concept sees you 'helping out' various spirits around town in the form of sweetly sombre fetch-quests.¹

This sequel's twist is an 'eyes closed' mechanic: if you can't see it, you can't see you. Because of that, slowly plodding around the ominous red mist of enemies, your rapidly increasing heartbeat indicating proximity, becomes a simple yet terrifying staple (as do creating distractions, using your torch, and just legging it). As your vision's frequently limited, the sound design is crucial. Between the lack of music, the almost echo-location function of the heartbeat, and disturbing noises made by the spirits,² it evokes the feeling that you are never truly safe. And you aren't. Lovely! **Max Williams**



FOOTNOTES ¹ Bringing offerings to graves, praying for the souls of the departed, the usual. ² These help identify which type of spirit is lurking ahead.

INFO **FORMAT** PS4 **PRICE** £35.99
ETA Out now **PUB** NIS America
DEV Acquire **PLAYERS** 1



Kamiwaza: Way Of The Thief

Mean streets of Mikado

Like a burglar in the night, the 2022 revival of Kamiwaza: Way Of The Thief, Acquire's spiritual successor to Tenchu, is unexpected. This PS2-era stealth game is an odd one to revive. It focuses on Ebizo, who dreams of becoming a noble thief. When his less-than-honourable peers kill a family during his first robbery, that falls apart. Escaping with an orphaned girl, Ebizo raises her as his own, starting an honest life. But when illness strikes Suzana, he returns to thieving.

Set within one town, Mikado, Ebizo must take on missions to secure medicine to keep Suzana alive, selling his loot at a local bathhouse.¹ You can grab most items with one button press, though some require multiple

hits, which looks like you're attacking the goods. You can sneak past people by hugging the wall, wear upgradeable disguises, and pick foes' pockets.

There's a surprising lack of suspense thanks to poor AI that means enemies rarely notice you unless you're directly in front of them. Even then, pressing ⊗ once you're spotted allows you to zipline away, ensuring they never saw you coming.² It's silly fun initially, but gets old quickly.

Other questionable design choices hamper the action too, but more importantly, Kamiwaza just isn't interesting. What was fun in 2006 feels shallow and dated now. Stealth fans might get a kick out of it but with a high price and bare-bones remaster, we'd struggle to recommend this. **Henry Stockdale**



FOOTNOTES ¹ It's unclear why the local thieves decided this was the most inconspicuous location in Mikado. The bathhouse is surely the one location where you have nothing to hide under. ² Sorry Persona fans, no Phantom Thievery this time, just actual thievery. But still, Ebizo is doing dodgy things for the right reasons.

INFO **FORMAT** PS5 (rev), PS4 **PRICE** £24.99
ETA Out now **PUB** Thunderful Publishing
DEV ClockStone Software **PLAYERS** 1



Lego Bricktales

Not quite a blockbuster

Beginning with perhaps the tropiest of wholesome game moves, Bricktales opens with a call-to-action letter from your grandad, a mad scientist and amusement park owner. The park is under threat from the local council¹ due to its state of disrepair, and he needs you to sort out this mess.

This plays out as you gather happiness – a commodity used to renovate the theme park – from the residents of the game's five biomes, who all just so happen to need something built. Each destination is made up of a handful of intricately detailed dioramas; they're gorgeous.

Buils to progress the story function as puzzles, ranging in scope and difficulty from the off. There's something both pleasing and embarrassing² about seeing your cobbled-together attempts disfiguring the otherwise-beautiful dioramas. Success is another matter entirely, though, and requires appeasing Bricktales' exacting AI, which can fail you for anything short of a perfection that the game does not spell out.

Constructing harder builds becomes frustrating owing to the controls. The camera and cursor both are unwieldy at best, verging on nightmarish when you're 50 bricks deep. There's no way to view the underside of your work, making top-down builds more guesswork than science. Worst of all is the inability to move multiple bricks simultaneously; you'll experience pain akin to stepping on a Lego brick upon realising you've built something just one grid notch too high. It's a shame as the concept is strong, a throwback to playing with the bricks as a child. Unfortunately, this is not the videogame realisation of those halcyon days, as it's hamstrung by finicky systems, and too mechanically inept to achieve the laid-back vibe it aims for. **Dan Solomon**



FOOTNOTES ¹ A sense of civic duty alone doesn't keep Windsor so tidy for the tourists, after all. ² We're sure there's a word for this in German.



Asterigos: Curse Of The Stars

Hard to pronounce, fun to play



INFO

FORMAT PS5
(reviewed), PS4

PRICE £28.99

ETA Out now

PUB TinyBuild

DEV Acme
Gamestudio

PLAYERS 1

LENGTH 20 hrs

ACCESSIBILITY
Multiple difficulty
settings; adjustable
font size

Should you enjoy a dash of Greek and Roman mythology in your soulslikes then Asterigos could be a flavoursome twist for you. You're put in the (presumably) sweaty sandals of Hilda, a young warrior who's aiming to find her lost father, but who gets sidetracked by, well, lots of bosses and random quests along the way. It's standard stuff really, but that doesn't mean it's not fun.

As with so many soulslikes, the combat is probably the most important aspect here, and while it's not especially nuanced it does have some cool ideas. Take the staff you can use, for example: instead of merely casting spells, you fling them out at your enemies using different motions, which makes the magical attacks feel a little more weighty. You can also equip two of any of the different weapon classes at once, which means you can switch between a magical staff and some punchy gauntlets mid-combo, which allows for some truly stylish moments. On top of that, each weapon has a special ability, such as a dash for the daggers, and you're able to infuse them with different elements, which can sometimes change how they behave.

FALLING STAR

It's a shame then, that this potential is all undermined by some rather unexciting and murky level design. Things are somehow both very linear and very hard to navigate, and it all feels a bit messy. You're nearly always making progress, but very rarely do you feel as though you're going the

right way – it's only when you come up against a boss that you feel certain. You'll probably give up on exploration early on due to how clumsy some of the levels feel to poke around. It's not helped by the needlessly dark areas either, which have us pumping up the gamma high enough to summon a Hulk.

and the hardest one is a good challenge for experienced ones who thirst for pain. The ability to customise your abilities and unlock skills as you go helps to keep combat feeling fresh and interesting, and some of the later bosses will be more than happy to oblige multiple attempts at defeating them.

The needlessly dark areas have us pumping up the gamma high enough to summon a Hulk.

Most of the boss fights are entertaining, though, even if one of the earliest encounters is against someone called Strong Man. How challenging you find the combat will largely depend on what difficulty setting you've chosen – the lowest difficulty setting is great for players less familiar with the soulslike genre,

It feels as though Asterigos is the kind of game that's a solid, albeit flawed first entry in a series, which the developer then follows up with a strong second game. It's still worth checking this out if you're vibing with the cartoony graphics or setting, but it's not quite a soulslike must-play... yet.



A solid soulslike, with some cool ideas in the combat. Despite a few technical flaws and some less-than-original takes, Asterigos is still worth your time. **Jason Coles**



Ask an ally to accompany you into town on an excursion and they can guide you to locations.



Saturnalia

Murder in the dark

Street lighting clearly isn't a priority for the local council in Gravoi. This small Sardinian village may be picturesque by the light of day, but at night very little cuts through the gloom. That's a problem because you have urgent detective work to attend to this particular evening and can barely see where you're going. Also because there's a ravenous monster on the loose.

Saturnalia combines the delights of the open investigation genre – think *Outer Wilds* or *Paradise Killer* – with hints of *Alien Isolation*, as you try to avoid being captured and eaten by a horned menace. Fortunately, you can switch control between four characters, and should one of them get caught by the monster, there's still time to use another to rescue them before they meet an unpleasant end. Lose the lot, though, and the map reshuffles, changing the shapes of streets and the positions of buildings before letting you back in.

LOST AND FOUND

The good news is that anything you achieved on an ill-fated run stays achieved – key items remain in your possession, for example, and shortcuts unlocked. That softens the blow of the roguelike restart, and ensures steady forward momentum as you stumble upon new locations to search, then pick up evidence that unveils sinister secrets or



INFO

FORMAT PS5 (reviewed), PS4

PRICE £19.99

ETA Out now

PUB Santa Ragione

DEV Santa Ragione

PLAYERS 1

LENGTH 8-10 hrs

ACCESSIBILITY

Motion blur; quality/performance mode; QTE auto-complete; hold/toggle controls; dyslexia-friendly font; tutorial prompts; keep village layout after game over; easier encounters; infinite matches; infinite stamina; auto-walk to destination



points to further lines of enquiry. The star of the show, in fact, is the clue board that fills automatically as you make noteworthy discoveries, linking locations, events, and legends to guide you towards further objectives. Each character in your quartet begins with a personal reason for being in town – looking for long-lost parents, assessing the local rocks for mining potential – but these soon start to be subsumed into a larger conspiracy.

And it's nice to have a little guidance since it's very easy to get disoriented. Light is scarce outdoors unless you dip into your limited supply of matches, and Saturnalia is designed to have you traipsing in circles around narrow streets and

stairwells, bumping into dead-end walls and forgetting where you just came from. It evokes the atmosphere of a certain kind of 1970s European horror film, where a location renowned for its history and beauty reveals an eerie, repressed strangeness – like the back streets of Venice in *Don't Look Now*. That sense is cemented here with overpowering music and an art style involving flickering pencil lines and expressionless characters that move like stop-motion mannequins.

HORROR SHOW

By the same token, however, the murkiness can become a nuisance when you're simply trying to get from A to B,

■ Saturnalia is designed to have you traipsing in circles around narrow streets and stairwells. ■



- 1** Telephones allow you to swap characters or teleport others to your position. **2** Most of the villagers want nothing to do with you, but one or two may help. **3** Bonfires constructed for a local festival offer rare sources of light.



particularly when the creature comes into play. On paper, it's a scary monster – it can find you at any time, you rarely get a good look at it, and its arrival sends you running in panic through the winding streets – but in practice it doesn't quite work. Because it's largely unscripted and you rarely see it coming, you may as well forget about it until you hear the rattling and chanting that heralds its approach, then hide and hope for the best. Rescue missions, meanwhile, can descend into farce, as you untie your captured mate from an altar only to get grabbed yourself as the creature returns. With the newly freed character you can then rescue the rescuer, getting grabbed again in the process, ad nauseam.

Mostly, then, the monster feels intrusive, which is a shame because Saturnalia's atmosphere and non-linear structure are ripe for tense encounters. There's a chilling moment, for instance, when you realise you need to explore the warren of mines beneath the village armed only with a box of matches, and the longer you put it off, the more the dread ferments in your mind. But when you take the plunge, the creature is merely something that may or may not become an irritant, and the real challenge you face here is following a rough map while keeping an eye out for items. At this stage, you may wish you could simply get on with piecing the story together, and that someone would just switch on all the lights.



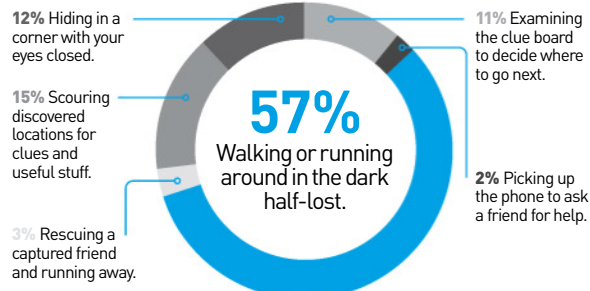
A compelling detective game with multiple threads to pull you through its dark Sardinian streets. Attempts to add horror to the mix, however, often fall flat. **Jon Bailes**

6

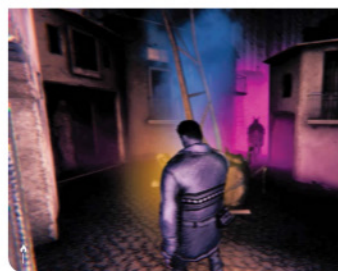
PLAY

THE PLAYBOOK

WHAT YOU DO IN: SATURNALIA



HOW TO... AVOID BEING MURDERED



When you hear the music that signals the creature is near, try to get indoors and stay out of sight. If there's nowhere to go, you may be able to distract it with firecrackers, or simply cover your eyes and find a dark corner. If you've been seen, run and hope you don't take a turn into a dead end.

STATPACK

168

The total number of clues you can find in the game, although you don't have to discover them all to piece the story together and finish it.

04

Player characters, each with unique abilities useful in different situations and personal quests to fulfil before escaping the village.

10%

Maximum stamina lost each time you're captured by the monster, until you can barely jog a few yards without gasping for breath.

LOVING/HATING



SEEING THE LIGHT

Every piece of evidence that helps uncover the supernatural conspiracy is a great motivator to carry on and find more.



FUMBLING IN THE DARK

Trying to do anything at speed, especially running from the creature, usually leads to confusion or death.

TROPHY CABINET



FEAR OF THE DARK

BRONZE
Use 100 matches. And Gravo is such a gloomy place at night, you'll be glad of them.



CHAIN BREAKER

SILVER
Rescue a captured character six times. You'd think they'd have learned by then...



BLESS ME FATHER FOR I HAVE SINNED

GOLD
Light all the votive candles in the church. Not just pretty; the light is welcome.

Liar! There are at least seven reasons to be afraid at any given time here.



ADLER

Please, there's no need to be afraid.

Signalis

Not entirely original, but we couldn't scare less about that

Silent Evil sounds like something you might produce after a day eating nothing but baked beans, but it's also a good nickname for this game. A love letter to old-school Resident Evil and Silent Hill written in blood, it borrows freely from the early days of those well-loved and influential series while still walking its own twisted path – both for better and for worse.

By exploring the environment at the beginning of the game, we discover that we are some sort of android and the captain of our crashed ship has gone missing, so we set off to find her. Of course, the situation is much, *much* more complicated than that, something that gradually becomes apparent through both conveniently dropped notes and the handful of anime-styled cutscenes.

While a huge amount of the game has been drawn from its influences – save rooms, twisted undead monster design, keycards, faux-retro graphics, and much more all feature – enough has been added or changed to make Signalis distinct. Aside from the cutscenes, controls are thankfully modern (although you can switch to tank controls if you really hate yourself), and the setting is a grim science-fiction future on another planet rather than a creepy contemporary mansion or town. There is a radio but, unlike Silent Hill's monster warning system, this one is used for



INFO

FORMAT PS4

PRICE £15.99

PUB Out now

Humble Games

DEV Rose-engine

PLAYERS 1-4

LENGTH 10 hours approx

ACCESSIBILITY

Selection of control schemes; adjustable text speed, combat difficulty, screen shake, and vibration; film grain and CRT mode on/off; swappable aim controls



solving puzzles, and even to counter one type of enemy.

I WILL SURVIVE

If you've played the first few Resident Evil or Silent Hill games, you'll know almost exactly what to expect. All resources are limited, including ammunition, so running past enemies is sometimes a better idea than taking them on – especially as most will randomly resurrect unless you burn them (and again, the items required to do so are rare). Combat is ordinarily basic aim-and-fire stuff, partly because it's a fairly minor part of the game. Progress means solving puzzles, finding keycards, solving puzzles, filling out your map, and solving puzzles.

The puzzle design (did we mention there are puzzles?) is excellent, and even (whisper it) superior to that of its influences. This doesn't mean that they're pretentiously complex; quite the opposite. The puzzles are all actually quite simple, the trick being in the delivery of the solutions. This might be as simple as reading the right file, it could be a traditional type of self-contained puzzle, or, most often, something *just* nudges you in the right direction, pushes something inside your brain that flips a switch which lights up a big sign that says 'Hang on a minute...'

MONSTERS MASHED

The map – a huge part of successfully navigating the

■ The puzzle design is excellent, and even (whisper it) superior to that of its influences. ■

THE PLAYBOOK

WHAT YOU DO IN: SIGNALIS

31% Solving puzzles, feeling clever even before you've fully solved them.

10% Running to or from a safe room, filling or emptying the storage crate.

5% Running past enemies, hoping they don't swipe you as you whizz by.

38%

Exploring places that are sometimes dark and often squelchy.

9% Fighting monsters with slightly clunky combat, worrying about your ammunition.

7% Jogging back through rooms looking for something that you've missed.

HOW TO... OPEN SAFES



The first safe you find just requires the default code, but after that, you need to refer to a note you find titled Frequencies. Turn on your radio, tune it to the frequency that corresponds with the picture on the safe, and make sure you pay attention to the numbers that appear. Job done!

STATPACK

01

Fake ending. A minor spoiler, but we don't want you to miss out on the significant chunk of action after the first set of credits.

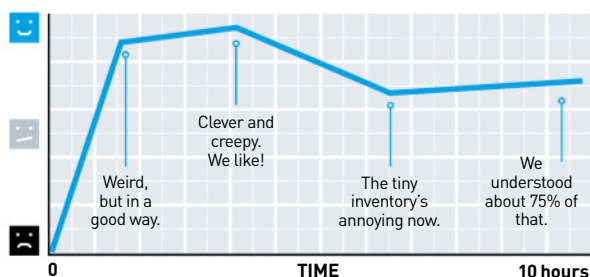
02

'True' endings at least. Ours was apparently the 'Memory' ending, although we have no idea at all how to trigger a different one.

01

Boss fight, right at the end. What we thought was a boss early on turned out to be a rare, but very much non-boss, enemy!

COMPEL-O-GRAPH



IS IT BETTER THAN?



YES

A very different game but similarly retro styled, Anodyne 2 isn't as consistently enjoyable as Signalis.



NO

The first Resident Evil to break significantly from tradition, Resident Evil 4 remains a classic.



YES

A legendary game, but the lack of 21st-century redesign in Resi Remastered gives Signalis the edge.



1 There aren't many story scenes, but the anime style within is sharp. 2 Keycards and items are often important to the story in ways that aren't immediately apparent. 3 First-person sequences are scattered throughout.



rabbit warrens of horror you encounter – is a bit of a mixed bag, partly because there are sections where the map is disabled entirely. Any unsolved puzzles you encounter are marked, enormously helpful for locating them again quickly. However, important items in rooms that you've been in are *not* marked, which is a problem for two reasons. First, the stylised graphics can sometimes make missing an item easier than it should be. Second, the stingy inventory space means that finding but being unable to pick up something important is annoyingly common.

You can hold six items in your inventory, with no way of adding extra slots. That doesn't sound too bad, right? But each weapon you carry takes up one

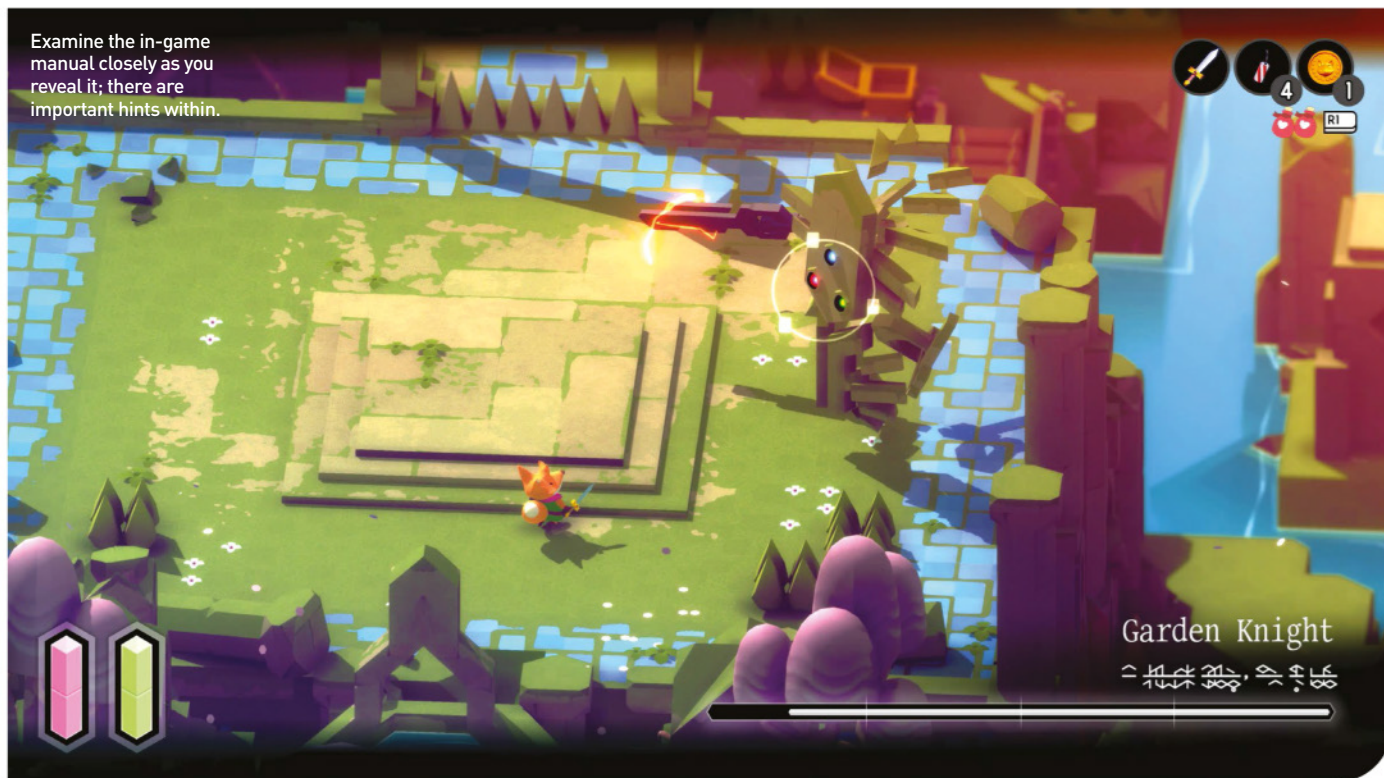
slot, any extra ammo for it another, each type of healing item occupies yet another, the flashlight (occasionally compulsory) another, any key or puzzle piece you carry take one each... you get the idea. Despite cutting down our survival luggage to the bare minimum, there is a *little* too much running back to the nearest safe room to access the storage crate than we would like.

Our playtime was artificially extended by a few irritations and, in all honesty, the game feels like it lasts perhaps an hour too long as it is. (The opaque storytelling only serves to reinforce this impression.) Nonetheless, it's a mostly successful modernisation of classic survival horror that will delight those who miss it.



A homage to 1990s survival horror that recognises where improvement is needed, Signalis has its own issues, but it emerges as a mostly gripping adventure. Luke Kemp





Tunic

The Bark Souls of cute adventure games



INFO

FORMAT PS5 (reviewed), PS4

PRICE £24.99

ETA Out now

PUB Finji

DEV Tunic Team

PLAYERS 1

LENGTH 6-8 hrs

ACCESSIBILITY

Customisable controls; adjustable vibration; reduce combat difficulty, screenshake, motion blur, and damage flash; no fail mode; no stamina restrictions; audio puzzle assistance

On a small beach a fox wakes up, at the foot of some stairs. You have no idea who they are, or how or why they arrived at this place; but you know that they are adorable! As a bonus, you soon find a stick and start hitting things with it. That's always fun! Don't worry, it won't be too long before you upgrade to a sword. You'll need it.

Tunic soon makes two things very clear. One, very little will be directly explained; and two, the journey is going to be a lot more difficult than the superb cartoony art might suggest. When the game is almost over, you unlock a dash that passes through enemies and their attacks. Consider this a warning for how difficult the final boss is...

Trying to button-bash your way through any enemy, big or small, is equivalent to begging to be respawned at the last save shrine. Dodging – and, once you have the shield, blocking – are essential parts of combat. Both of these feed from your limited stamina bar, too, so you have to employ them tactically. In a boss fight, or when up against multiple enemies, death can be only seconds away regardless of how much health you have.

FOX IT UP

However! Accessibility options include (slightly) more forgiving combat, invincibility, and infinite stamina, any of which can be flipped on or off at any time. You can ignore them all, lean on one or more consistently, or activate them for the trickiest sections. The developers clearly care only that you

enjoy the game however you wish, which is an attitude we'd like to see more of.

Combat is important, but it's not the sole focus of the game. The map has an open world design and a depth that isn't immediately apparent. There are areas and puzzles that are easily missed, or seen but not

that you're likely to be left with questions, while still understanding and being surprised by the twists and turns, all the while soaking up the fantastical, and occasionally slightly disturbing, atmosphere.

It must be said that the determination to withhold and bury information, combined with

Your understanding of what's going on comes almost entirely from what you see.

unlocked, even when the credits start to roll. Tunic is a great example of environmental storytelling, too. With no dialogue (at least, little that you can understand) your understanding of what's going on comes almost entirely from what you see. This is communicated just well enough

the open world design, can sometimes make the way forward unclear. There are, at least, many guides on the interwebs to help you (and the PS5 version features excellent implementation of the console's hint system). Besides, it's a world you won't mind getting lost in *too* much.



Tunic can appeal equally to those seeking a solid challenge, and those who want to be able to cruise through the experience. Both will find a great game. **Luke Kemp**



INFO

FORMAT PS4 PRICE £11.99 ETA Out now
PUB Dangen Entertainment DEV Fummy PLAYERS 1



The Witch's House

MV

MV = murdering Viola

Once more, it's a pleasure to see RPG Maker horror titles getting ported to console, and *The Witch's House* is a short but sweet demonstration of how effective the genre can be. This iteration also boasts reimagined visuals, plus a new unlockable difficulty for extra story events.

Making her way through the witch's house, because the way home is blocked and she doesn't really have anywhere else to be, Viola must complete various puzzles and avoid death at every turn. You can examine almost

the simplest of mistakes or one poorly made decision heightens the devious atmosphere. The various bumps, smashes, and (most commonly) splats thrown in to startle you have added edge because you never know if they signal that you're seconds away from death. Any sign could portend a giant skull popping up and grinding your bones for its bread. Progress is fraught, and you may find yourself having to undo your own puzzle solutions because you're not yet carrying the right item to handle what's about to come at you – and being unprepared equals death, of course!

What happens if you read The Book Of Death? Well, what did you expect to happen?

everything for a few lines of text, rewarding your curiosity. However, the reward is often death. What happens if you read *The Book Of Death*? Well, what did you expect to happen?

KILLING ME SWIFTLY

Developer Fummy manages to balance surprisingly effective jump scares with a dash of good humour. Similarly, the fact you might meet a sticky end from

There's no real sense of cohesion between conundrums, mostly owing to the nature of a magically changing house. Even so, they're entertaining, with a clever attention to detail. While the brief flicker of a story doesn't really compel playing it again on Extra difficulty, it's still a fun little adventure that nails the horror atmosphere without any of the bells and whistles of many high-budget games.



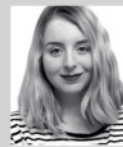
The *Witch's House* may be very small, but so are chilli peppers and they still pack a punch. Solve some puzzles and enjoy a few scares... and a few untimely ends. **Max Williams**



THREE TO PLAY



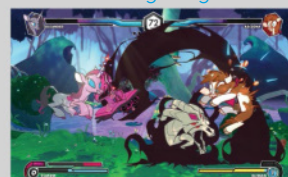
PSN games you might have missed



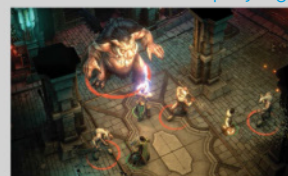
Every month, loads of games come to the PS Store. You'd be hard-pressed to play them all, so we're looking at some that didn't quite make the cut. This month we're lighting them up and knocking them down across short bouts and many hours of adventure.



First, allow us to illuminate you. In *Seed Of Life*, protagonist Cora searches for the titular alien device in the hopes of rekindling the sun and saving her planet, which is dying without the light. While the lushly realised world, with gorgeous plants, craggy rocks, and dramatic skies, is one you'll want to get lost in, there's a lot holding you back. For a start, your exploration is significantly restricted by a toxic, health-sapping atmosphere outside of waypoints, and you're given very little guidance on where to go between them. Still, at only a few hours long, this may be an action-adventure puzzler you'll find it worth shining a light on.



Next, do you know what an ungulate is? If you do, then chances are you're already aware of *Them's Fighting Herds*, the fighting game with an all-female cast of hooved mammals. In addition to the ones you'd expect, such as a cow and a sheep, there are a couple you might not – a unicorn and a longma (a Chinese mythical dragon-scaled, winged horse). It's more than just a riff on *My Little Pony*, though the concept started as a fangame. The fighting credit is there, too, the cute veneer hiding plenty of technical moves, though it can feel like each fighter is maybe a bit too quick to learn without loads of surprises. A story mode presented like a top-down RPG features lots of chatting and even dungeon-like exploration as you take on enemy encounters. A novel diversion, if perhaps not the next must-play fighter.



Finally, it's time to plot a path through the dark in expansive RPG *Pathfinder: Wrath Of The Righteous*. Based on the *Pathfinder* TTRPG and featuring many, many, many hours of isometric action through a fantasy land chock-full of demons, and with interesting choices for you to make, you can perhaps understand why this isn't an ideal title for anyone on a deadline. But if you're a genre fan, there's little that should deter you from taking the tiefling by the horns and losing yourself in this cracking, combat-heavy campaign. Who will you be, and how many demons will you kiss – uh, we mean kill!

Overwatch 2

One step forward, two steps back

As a tank like D.VA getting up close and personal with the enemy is essential.



INFO

FORMAT PS5 (reviewed), PS4
PRICE Free
ETA Out now
PUB Blizzard
DEV Blizzard
OFFLINE REVIEW N/A
PLAYERS Multi
CROSSPLAY PC, Xbox, Switch
CROSS-GEN Yes

Players unfamiliar with the mechanical intricacies of Blizzard's 2016 hero shooter could easily to jump into a match in its sequel and wonder what's actually changed. Behind the obvious surface-level tweaks such as a shiny new menu system and updated visuals, however, there lies a radically reimagined experience – one that prioritises fast-paced arcade action over the more methodical team play of its predecessor.

Emblematic of this shift in focus is the move to a 5v5 format, from Overwatch's 6v6. With now only one Tank per team, the arsenals of characters like D.VA, Zarya, and Orisa have received substantial buffs across the board. On the whole, Tanks now have weapons that deal considerably more

The result of the changes is a faster game, filled with rapid one-on-one encounters.

damage, health pools that are substantially deeper, and a few new offensive abilities to replace removed crowd-control options like portable shields. Even the comparatively unchanged Damage and Support heroes have received class-wide passive bonuses, rewarding damage dealers with increased

movement and reload speed while giving healers passive health regeneration.

The cumulative result of these small changes is a faster game, filled with rapid one-on-one encounters and far more suited to chasing impressive killstreaks than focusing heavily on team composition. Thrilling matches



in Push, a game mode that pits two teams in a frantic tug-of-war over a moving robot, showcase this formula at its best but it's hard to ignore the fact that this new design philosophy is a departure from the strategic rock-paper-scissors gameplay that gave the original such a distinct identity.

RISE AND GRIND

Conversely, previously gripping legacy maps like Lijiang Tower or Ilios now seem slower, with too many wide spaces clearly designed with a sixth team member in mind. The much-derided new monetisation model is almost inevitably to blame for many of these changes. The move towards grinding for recently released characters via a battle pass necessitates a core roster that doesn't rely too heavily on hard counters to maintain

balance. Even so, the newly increased damage-dealing potential of heroes like Soldier 76 lends itself to frustrating public matches that are completely dominated by one or two particularly skilled players.

Overwatch had its fair share of balance issues back in the day, but compounding the sequel's problems is a starting roster that

locks most of the old favourites behind level requirements for new players. It's an incredibly arbitrary and monotonous obstacle to overcome and, while owners of the original game have been granted access to the full roster from the get-go, it invariably reduces the variety of heroes you encounter during unranked matches online.

THREE-TO-PLAY

01



Getting frags and taking names. Your team's *Damage* heroes like Ashe and newcomer Sojourn are expected to get the most eliminations in a match thanks to powerful passive abilities.

02



Tank players are going to need to adapt to their new role. With a greatly increased health pool, absorbing damage for teammates and leading the offensive on objectives is the name of the game.

03



The backbone of any good team, *Support* are mostly responsible for making sure health pools stay topped up. New character Kiriko offers a more offensive take on the role thanks to her formidable kunai.



Fun at times. Improved visuals look the part, but this sequel strays too far from the team-oriented gameplay that made the original so compelling. **Dashiell Wood**



ExtendedPLAY

From updates to favourites – the games we just can't quit



Deathverse: Let It Die

Get ready to re-enter the ring, senpai



This might not be the most conventional sequel, but it's good to be back in the quirky post-apocalyptic universe of 2016's Let It Die. An unexpected multiplayer followup set several hundred years after the previous game,

Deathverse breathes new life into the methodical soulslike gameplay of its predecessor by transferring the action to an arena setting.

Forget trudging around grimy dungeons; fast-paced melee combat is the focus here and I've been enjoying mastering my skills as a contestant in the Death Jamboree. That's a near-future game show that pits 16 players head-to-head in a free-for-all fight for survival. Snappy controls make for thrilling brawls while the inclusion of basic stealth mechanics and a system that rewards hits with bursts of health regeneration makes it easy to hold your own against more skilled opponents.

PETITE DEATH

Despite the compact scope, matches mostly unfold in typical battle royale fashion with the map split into distinct sections and gradually closed off by toxic contamination. It sounds formulaic, but the addition of prowling cryptids provides occasional

INFO

FORMAT PS5, PS4
PUB GungHo
Online
Entertainment
DEV Supertrick
Games
YEAR 2022



bursts of PvE to keep you on your toes. Powerful NPC hunters can also drop in at a moment's notice, bringing a splash of asymmetrical survival horror as you're forced to keep low and adapt your strategies to evade them.

Although the first game's googly-eyed Grim Reaper is disappointingly absent, each match is accompanied by

commentary from an in-universe presenter, and a striking art direction that mixes belle époque elements with a distinct science-fiction flair makes for a cast of equally charming characters.

Each match is accompanied by commentary from an in-universe presenter.

Successful runs are rewarded with experience points and crafting resources, which you

can spend on more powerful weapon blueprints back at base. The series' infamous microtransactions (which saw you paying to continue your current run) have been toned down, with paid content largely limited to cosmetics and a more conventional battle pass.

It's a shame you can't

matchmake with friends at

time of writing, but a Duos

mode is on the way as part of

the second wave of seasonal

content. New maps are sorely

needed given the slim

selection here but, given the

first game is still receiving

updates almost six years on,

we're optimistic that the

developers won't *ahem* let

it die. **Dashiell Wood**

Paladins

Don't forget the original 5v5 hero shooter

INFO **FORMAT** PS4 **PUB** Hi-Rez Studios
DEV Evil Mojo Games **YEAR** 2018



You'd be forgiven for thinking that the launch of Overwatch 2 would eclipse any interest in its

biggest free-to-play competitor. But that's far from the case, and returning to the thriving Paladins community almost four years after the game's release has us seeing this quirky hero shooter in a new light.

Published by Hi-Rez, which has a slate of online games including the popular Smite, there's a clear MOBA influence on the design philosophy behind



can use tossed coins to ricochet bullets around corners. It's fun to try some of them out just to see how they handle.

Unlocking new characters can take time for free players, but the ability to select your own customisable deck of character cards helps you make the most of your starting roster. These cards range from simple damage

We appreciate the wacky mechanical diversity brought by the likes of Moji and Saati.

Paladins' roster. While Overwatch currently has 35 playable heroes, Paladins has almost double that figure for players to choose from, and the focus seems to be on providing variety in gameplay rather than sticking to conventional hero shooter roles. With the latest incarnation of the Overwatch cast feeling more familiar than ever, we appreciate the wacky mechanical diversity brought by the likes of Moji, a dragon-riding, damage-dealing gremlin, and Saati, a sharpshooter who

buffs to new mechanics that fundamentally reshape the way you play the game, opening the door to exciting sub-classes and further specialisation.

As a result, things can often feel a little unbalanced in the heat of battle but the number of variables when it comes to team composition and individual builds ensures that no two matches ever feel the same. You'll come back just to try something new. It's total chaos, then, but in the very best of ways. **Dashiell Wood**



Plenty of unique hero designs and skills help Paladins stand out in a crowded genre.



Riding a dragon is something we'll always want to give a go in a game.

Century: Age Of Ashes

How to train a dragon

INFO **FORMAT** PS5, PS4 **PUB** Playwing
DEV Playwing **YEAR** 2022



We've all been in our fair share of dogfights in videogames, but dragonfights are another story, and if there's one thing I love about Century, it's that developer Playwing gets the feeling of riding a dragon right.

Or at least, it's how I imagine it'd be (and I've spent plenty of time thinking about it). More than reskinning spaceships or planes, there's a twitchiness to the control of all the game's dragon types that makes them feel like beasts first and foremost. You duck, you weave, you

up a variety of dragon-based attacks (mostly fire, but there are others too – like a large bolt of lightning). For the most part that core is fun, although with maps so large and dragons so speedy there can be a lot of downtime between exciting flame-offs. That's after you spend time matchmaking.

DRAG-ON DRAGON

In my experience, matchmaking can take quite a while. And, even worse, some players will drop out early without being replaced, meaning a 6v6 match (the standard mode) can quickly turn into a 6v2 beatdown – not terrific fun for either side.

You duck, you weave, you turn on a dime, and, most importantly, you soar.

turn on a dime, and, most importantly, you soar. And spew fire to take down your rivals, of course.

Century's main game modes are built around one team taking down another, racing to get the most kills.

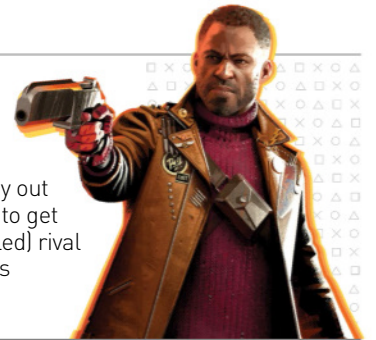
That means you'll spend most of your time lining

It's a shame, as there's a great core here, and a definite allure in pursuing the great dragon designs through the first season's 'Dragon Pass'. Still, despite the joy of that first flight, I'm struggling to keep saddling up with plenty of other games to tempt me. **Oscar Taylor-Kent**



PS5 Hall of fame

THE DEFINITIVE GUIDE TO THE NEW GEN'S GREATEST GAMES



01



Deathloop

Endlessly stylish, we keep coming back to this time and time again. Trapped on a time-looping island, Colt must blast his way out by assassinating eight targets in one day, using special powers to get the upper hand, all while avoiding a (sometimes player-controlled) rival hunter, Julianna. With everything we love about Arkane's games distilled into one hyper-slick experience, this is a must-play.

02



Ratchet & Clank: Rift Apart

A delightful return for the lombax/robo duo, using PS5's power to allow seamless portal hopping and stunning vistas and DualSense to give the comically large arsenal real oomph. A real showpiece that feels marvellous in the hands, and makes the case for PS5 exclusives.

03



Demon's Souls

Not many games allow you to feel the thrum of a gigantic heart in the controller. From sword slashes against nightmarish creatures to feeling magic fill your hands, this stunning recreation of the PS3 classic is a tour of just what makes PS5 so great.

04



Uncharted: Legacy Of Thieves Collection

The best got better. Presenting Nathan Drake's final outing alongside spin-off The Lost Legacy, this collection implements a range of PS5 features. Higher framerates smooth out the action, haptic feedback boosts gunfights, and 3D audio adds a new dimension to the banter.

05



Final Fantasy VII Remake Intergrade

Cloud and the gang get a glow up with better visuals and slicker combat that limit breaks this bold reimagining of the Midgar section. Yuffie joins in with an extra story that bridges the gap between this and what's to come, cleverly playing on nostalgia and fan expectation.

06



Marvel's Spider-Man: Miles Morales

A new hero for a new generation, Miles Morales swings on to PS5 with a new sense of purpose. The low-key story offers a more intimate Spider-adventure than Parker's bombastic escapade, but when the action kicks in, the ray-traced visuals light up the screen.

07



Control Ultimate Edition

Jesse Faden's mind-bending, environment-destroying, object-chucking new-weird adventure sings on PS5. A framerate of 60fps delights, and Remedy's use of ray tracing is among the best we've seen. The sole problem is you have to pick only one of two visual options.

08



Hitman 3

On PS5, Agent 47's latest hit list looks beautiful – oh boy, those reflections. The good news is not only can you play the latest missions on PS5, you can replay all missions from Hitman and Hitman 2 inside IO's new PS5-developed engine. That's a lot of content.

09



Astro's Playroom

Free and pre-installed on your PS5, this is more than a showcase for your new console's best, most innovative features. Astro's Playroom is a beautifully crafted, if short-lived, platform adventure that takes a tour through everything that makes PS5 so special.

10



Resident Evil Village

Ethan Winters discovers why this village's house prices were so low. As he searches for his stolen baby, tall vampire Lady Dimestreco tees off a host of supernatural nasties in the slickest Resi to date, mixing bombastic action with some series-topping fright.

11



Ghost Of Tsushima Director's Cut

Feeling like a fresh take on Assassin's Creed, the open-world island of Tsushima is engaging to explore, and thanks to a minimal UI, endlessly beautiful. Combined with weighty combat and tricky stealth, this supercharged version feels like a real epic.

12



Gran Turismo 7

Like taking a bath in luxury motor oil while Yamauchi and the rest of Polyphony Digital relax you with cosy car history. The good vibes are matched by fantastic visual fidelity, and car handling enhanced by the DualSense controller for unparalleled driving feedback.

13



Solar Ash

Playing like a cross between Jet Set Radio and Sonic, gliding through the Ultravoid feels buttery-smooth. The subtle rumble of the DualSense offers an immersive layer to both movement and the action of pinning down an enemy. This is well worth losing yourself in.

14



Guilty Gear Strive

If this is the smell of the game, then we don't need any candles. Brash as ever, and laden with head-banging tracks, this anime-styled fighter is a spectacle to watch or play. Pared-down mechanics make it accessible, but there's still plenty of depth for skilled players.

15



The Nioh Collection

Team Ninja is on top form with its unique samurai take on soulslikes. Tough as hanzo steel, both games run great on PS5, and offer nearly 200 hours of co-op demon-slaying action that'd put even Yojimbo through his paces. It's a challenge well worth taking on.

16



Elden Ring

Souls goes open world, and FromSoftware makes sure to do things its way: with minimal handholding, but plenty of digit-strewn enemies. Each hill teases strange dark fantasy sights just over the crest, and the game keeps surprising (despite some rare repetition).

17



Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order

Cal and BD-1 Jedi jump over any hurdles the original release threw their way, PS5's power making this feel like the game it should have been at launch. While a little safe at times, this adventure feels like classic Star Wars as you explore planets metroidvania-style.

18



Horizon Forbidden West

Stunning to look at on PS5, Aloy's new quest gets even more science-fictional. While more of the same in some regards (there are plenty of question marks to explore and camps to clear), in big machine fights the metal really shines, and there are some absolute units here.

19



Ghostwire: Tokyo

Possessed by ghost hunter KK, Akito has to put a stop to a masked villain who has unleashed demonic fog all over Tokyo. The open world is packed with collectibles and side-missions that explore Japanese folklore, and the DualSense-rumbling combat is punchy.

20



Final Fantasy XIV: Online

Endwalker presents a compelling conclusion to this MMORPG's decade-long storyline. The journey on PS5 from the beginning is a smooth one too, boasting breezy load times across Eorzea and beyond. Besides all that, who doesn't want to be a cool cat- or bunny-person?

21



Disco Elysium: The Final Cut

Welcome to Revachol. You're a mess of a cop with no memory and barely any clothes. Solve a hanging, invent communism, sing karaoke... but do it your way. Skill check successes and failures pave a story of your own, and the writing is superb.

22



Hades

After a wait, Supergiant's latest rushes to the defence of roguelikes and leaves us going "Hell yeah." It effortlessly pulls off that 'just one more go' feeling thanks to fast, frenetic combat and the rewarding nuggets of story each death treats you to. Slick and stylish.

23

NEW



I Was A Teenage Exocolonist

After crash-landing on an alien planet, you and your fellow colonists must choose how to survive. Challenges from wrestling beasts to school lessons see you wielding memories as cards, and a time loop hides plenty of mystery, making an excellent story.

24



Paradise Killer

Welcome to the bizarre, regenerating island of Paradise, where the ruling Council has been murdered. Play as expert investigator Lady Love Dies and explore the vaporwave landscape, in which you have unmatched freedom to find or fail to find the truth.

25



Bugsnax

You are what you eat in this peculiar adventure that's not afraid to walk (and crawl) its own path. Scour Snaktooth Island for its missing denizens, wolf down a handful of Snax... and see what happens. It doesn't exactly push PS5, but it will test your imagination.

PLAY ON

Know what you like and looking for more?
Here are more to enjoy on your PS5



Should you want the freedom to choose how you live your virtual life, **I Was A Teenage Exocolonist** has few peers – it mixes deck building, stat training, and narrative chops. But if you're yearning for more like it, we still have a few choices to offer. What will you choose?

PICK #1



The Sims 4

More simoleons, more problems

Looking to embrace a digital life, from cleaning your house to heading out to work? Then The Sims is still one of the best games around to give you that experience, and the latest version has just gone free-to-play (the ultimate bargain!). While there's little narrative to speak of other than the ones you dream up yourself as you push your little people to follow their dreams, it's still dictated by their stats. Though that does include a toilet meter.

PICK #2



Prey – Mooncrash

Go rogue in space

Like Exocolonist, Mooncrash forces you to relive a series of bad situations repeatedly. And in space, at that. This simulation takes place on a secret moon base as it's attacked by alien Typhon, and challenges you to survive in roguelike fashion, though here you have a gun and special powers. This standalone DLC builds on the mechanics of the standard Prey, but encourages experimentation as you try over and over to repel the invasion.

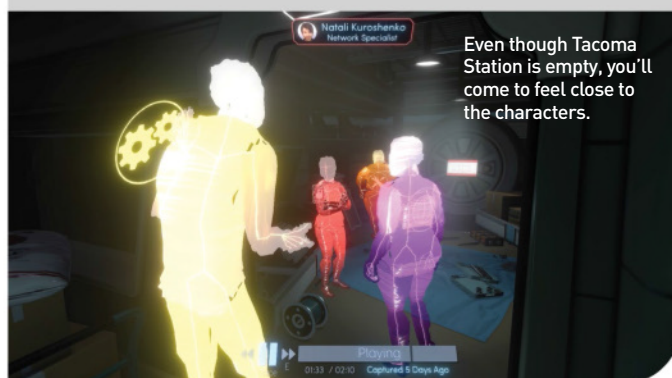
PICK #3



Tacoma

Lost in space

Where did everyone on this space station go? Unlike in Exocolonist, where you live through the trials and tribulations of trying to make a life for yourself in space, here you arrive after the fact. It's up to you to play detective voyeur, piecing together the mystery of what happened as you poke around holo-projection recordings of everyday life with your nifty little AR device. If it's a science-fiction narrative you're after, this is one of the best.



Even though Tacoma Station is empty, you'll come to feel close to the characters.



PS4 Hall of fame

THE DEFINITIVE GUIDE TO THE LAST GEN'S GREATEST GAMES

01



Red Dead Redemption 2

You won't find another open world quite like this, the streets of Los Santos paling in comparison to this gorgeous western sprawl. Arthur Morgan's wild west adventure is epic, emotional, and has enough teasing mysteries on every horizon for no two cowboys' journeys to feel the same. Train robberies, tootin' headshots, and killing racists, there's never a dull moment in Rockstar's greatest.



02



Grand Theft Auto V

Laughing in the face of other cross-gen ports, GTA V on PS4 is more than a mere HD remaster. Upgraded to a glorious 1080p, it weaves together everything that made the PS3 original great, with new music, more dynamic weather, and a game-changing FPS mode.

03



God Of War

A departure in some ways but a resounding return in others, Kratos is back with a son and a ruddy big axe. Taking the legend from Greek to Norse mythology, this entry brings a lot to the table while improving on what was core to the earlier series' identity.

04



The Last Of Us Part II

Arguably the original is holistically better but there are few games that push PS4 to its limits as this sequel does. With near photoreal visuals, emotional twists that land, and enough new ideas to ensure you're always thinking, this is a slick followup.

05



Dreams

This is a feature-laden platform of artistic tools that enables you to create everything from characters, elements, and scenes to entire games, and resets any ideas about what a console 'game' should be and do. Dreams should be installed on every PS4.

06



The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt Game Of The Year Edition

The White Wolf's epic journey is an RPG experience like no other on PS4. It's been made even more spectacular with this gigantic pack stuffed with DLC, making it a must-have part of any gaming library.

07



Assassin's Creed Odyssey

A beautiful open world where every Greek island tells a unique story, AC Odyssey is an epic in the truest sense, with lively writing, mythical beasts to battle, and a poignant Assassin's Creed story that lays the bed for all the lore to come. A brilliant spectacle.

08



Horizon Zero Dawn

A staggeringly large world that condenses cracking combat, accessible systems, and uncut eye candy into an action RPG that will please anyone. In Aloy, PlayStation might just have a new icon. Come for the robo-fights, stay for the exquisitely dense mythology.

09



Marvel's Spider-Man

Borrowing heavily from Rocksteady's acclaimed Batman series, this delivers the heart and soul of Marvel's superhero. It ticks every box you could ask for: perfect web-swinging, a powerful story, a roster of classic villains, and all of New York City to defend.

10



Persona 5 Royal

The most stylish JRPG ever made finds its definitive form in expanded release Royal. It combines dark and moving teen angst with unforgettable friendships that power you up in the heart-invading dungeons, and sets the gold standard for the genre.

11



Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice

FromSoftware's latest adventure repackages its unflinchingly difficult combat into a fantastical take on feudal Japan. More accessible than Bloodborne but layered with equally clever and subtle ideas, this is director Hidetaka Miyazaki's best yet.

12



Bloodborne

With the finest third-person melee combat in gaming, droolworthy art design, and the most twisted monsters imaginable, this is a gorgeously gothic must-have. The Old Hunters expansion adds enough nightmare fuel to make a return to Yharnam essential.

13



Monster Hunter: World

Presenting a vibrant open world, light on story but heavy on monster-mashing action, this is the most accessible entry in the series yet. Perfecting the feel-good grind through its complex systems and pitch-perfect multiplayer, it's a PS4 must-play.

14



Resident Evil 2

Powered by the RE Engine, this remake is more than a classic game with a facelift. The new Tyrant and improved zombie AI add tension, and fresh areas not seen in the PS1 classic update the core gameplay making this Resi 2 a celebration of PS1 and PS4.

15



Yakuza 0

Set in Japan in the '80s, this is the perfect entry point to the long-running series. Bouncing between two heroes, you take part in a crime thriller by bashing enemies into dropping piles of cash, and undertake side-quests that include stealthily buying pornography.

16



Psychonauts 2

Level design and narrative mesh together in this long-awaited sequel. Bounce around vibrant, ever-creative platform worlds inside other peoples' minds as you help them conquer trauma – and save the world. Ever-warm, the script is one of the funniest around.

17



Nier Automata

Few games require immediate replaying, but this *demand*s it. The twisty-turny story reveals more just when you think you're done, and the android combat as you explore is top-notch thanks to PlatinumGames' expertise in creating character action titles.

18



Mass Effect Legendary Edition

A space opera in game form. Explore the galaxy as you try to stop a universe-wide threat, building a team of the best as you go. The adventures are better than ever in this smoothed-over version. A fan of science-fiction sagas? You owe it to yourself to have one of your own.

19



Days Gone

On the surface this seems to be a step backwards: a testosterone-fuelled Freaker-killing adventure, one man and his bike versus the apocalypse. Slowly you realise Bend Studio's playing with you, and everything's flipped on its head – while the action's excellent throughout.

20



Dragon Quest XI: Echoes Of An Elusive Age

JRPGs don't get more classic-feeling than this, but DQ embraces its traditional qualities, giving its turn-based fights and Toriyama-designed visuals a modern overhaul. This is an adventure that'll stick with you.

21



Dishonored 2

The follow-up to a PS3 great, mixing a creative skillset with impressive level design to create a Kaldwin-ning immersive sim. From the shifting rooms of The Clockwork Mansion to learning to link your powers, there's so much scope for experimenting.

22



Alien: Isolation

Explore Ridley Scott's original vision of a horrifying future in startling fidelity, as this game recreates the tension with an attention to detail that borders on the obsessive. It's time to remember what made the xenomorph so scary... and then get killed by it.

23



Shadow Of The Colossus

Bluepoint completely overhauls the visuals of Team Ico's masterpiece but still manages to match the original step-for-step in its remake. New controls and a beautiful photo mode add to the package. Wander's tragic quest has never looked or played better.

24



Tekken 7: Definitive Edition

The title for best fighter on PS4 is fiercely fought over, but for our prize money King remains the, er, king. Easy to pick up, with plenty of depth, few fighters feel quite as crunchy as this. With all DLC characters now released, from Noctis to Negan, it's time to get sweaty.

25



Mafia: Definitive Edition

The mobster fantasy comes to life in this full-on remake. What was once stiff now drips period atmosphere, and while the open world is still mostly set dressing, it delivers a rollicking and affecting crime story. Any limitations almost feel refreshing in retrospect.



DASH'S DAZZLING DEALS

Watching the pennies? We'll help you play more without breaking the bank

UNDER £20



Resident Evil 3 Remake

£17.99 approx (PS4, Argos)

Fear zombies, not your bank balance

Stalked by the super-powered Nemesis and armed with an array of assault weapons, Jill Valentine and Carlos Oliveira must escape Raccoon City by any means necessary. This largely standalone story may be a little short, clocking in at only six hours, but explosive set-pieces make for one ride you won't want to miss. The action has been dialled up to 11, but there are still plenty of hidden collectibles to incentivise slower play. Thanks to an excellent free upgrade PS5 players can also take advantage of ray-traced visuals, faster loading times, and adaptive triggers.

UNDER £15



Grid Legends

£14.99 (PS4, Game)

Cheaper than most streaming services

Coming from veteran EA studio Codemasters, this year's entry in the long-running Grid series puts a narrative spin on serious motorsport. Thanks to its cast of professional actors, the lengthy single-player story is the star of the show. Charting your rise to stardom in the racing world, its combination of in-engine cutscenes and full-motion video make for a unique narrative experience on par with the best of documentary television at a fraction of the cost. A free PS5 upgrade is available and the multiplayer modes provide a reason to stick around after the credits roll.

UNDER £10



Starlink: Battle For Atlas

£7.95, approx (PS4, Amazon)

An out-of-this-world deal

Released during the last days of the toys-to-life genre back in 2018, Starlink is a surprisingly compelling interplanetary adventure in the vein of No Man's Sky. You explore a bustling open-world galaxy filled with space-pirate dogfights and seven planets to traverse; any toy accessories are entirely optional. DLC bundles of all extra content are available on the PlayStation store, but this starter kit contains everything you need to complete the campaign. DualSense users may struggle with the included controller mount, but all accessories still work via USB.



Explore the universe for under a tenner in Starlink: Battle For Atlas.



PSVR Hall of fame

THE VIRTUAL REALITY HITS YOU HAVE TO PLAY

01



Tetris Effect

Tetris, yeah? It might be a great game, but it's easy to understand why you'd brush this version off as 'just more Tetris' at a glance. Yet Tetsuya Mizuguchi's trippy, transcendent take on the block-based puzzler is nothing short of a masterpiece. Sure, you can play it without PSVR, but in the virtual space it really becomes next level, transforming one of the tightest puzzle games ever made into an emotional ride.



02



Hitman 3

Every mission in the World Of Assassination trilogy can be played in PSVR via the latest entry in the series. That's a lot of murderous action. It all plays brilliantly too, with the act of puzzling through hits as Agent 47 perfectly suited to virtual reality. One of PSVR's best.

09



Keep Talking And Nobody Explodes

Who knew bombs could bring people together? With one headsetted Defuser, and as many Experts as you can fit around a 23-page manual, no other VR game comes close for inclusive, endless multiplayer fun. Just make sure you don't let Ian issue any instructions – KABOOM!

03



The Persistence

This first-person horror roguelike offers perfectly sized chunks of survival bursts. It's everything you'd expect from a full PS4 release, but in PSVR it's filled with clever ideas, unique weapons, genuine jump scares, and fab looks – plus great couchplay as well.

10



Statik

Saw meets Portal in this fantastic puzzler. It makes ingenious use of the DualShock 4 by giving every button a specific function. You'll need to use them all to free your hands from the strange box in which they're trapped. An intriguing concept done well.

04



Rez Infinite

Tetsuya Mizuguchi's vision becomes reality in PSVR. This psychedelic rhythm rail shooter has achieved its final form. Its crowning achievement? New level Area X; it's powerful enough to bring players to tears. Worthy of its name, this is a timeless title.

11



Firewall: Zero Hour

There's only one game mode, a cat-and-mouse assault to find and either destroy or protect a laptop, but when the shooting is this laser-focused, who could want more? A PS Aim controller is a must to get the most from PSVR's standout shooter.

05



Astro Bot Rescue Mission

This pint-sized adventure packs charm in spades even if it isn't exactly chock-full of challenge. Bringing the classic puzzle platformer formula bang up to date in PSVR, it won't take many levels before you're calling out, "Beam me up, Botty!" Also, the nippers will love it.

12



Resident Evil VII: Biohazard

Can you can go eye-to-eye with the Bakers? Playing in VR raises the tension to almost unbearable levels and has gameplay benefits such as face-aiming, which makes shooting a lot easier. A brilliant example of how VR can improve already great games.

06



Star Wars: Squadrons

A fan's dream come true: experience epic Star Wars space battles from the cockpits of the films' most famous starfighters. Whether you're flying a TIE fighter or X-wing there's absolutely no thrill like skimming the surface of a Star Destroyer in PS VR.

13



Sniper Elite VR

With realistic gunplay at the heart of this series, it was always going to be a natural fit for VR. But its support for an array of setups and how it squeezes a truly impressive amount of tension into 20-minute missions means this hits the bullseye of VR greatness.

07



Iron Man VR

With a finely-crafted control setup that enables flight within small sandbox maps, and gives you the option to inhabit the designer shoes of the billionaire playboy too, Iron Man VR is an almost-perfect interpretation of the famous Avenger. It's a PSVR must-play.

14



Doom VFR

A new take on a classic game, this proves first-person shooters can shine in PSVR. A mix of control choices, including the PS Aim controller, ensures Doom is as fast and fluid in VR as it's ever been. Every PSVR owner needs this demon-slaying outing in their collection.

08



Blood & Truth

The truth? You can't handle the truth. But if you can, then you'll discover one of PSVR's best shooters, tied to the kind of slick cinematic narrative we're used to from Sony's non-VR releases. Blood & Truth is one of the most complete games for PSVR.

15



To The Top

This creative platform-puzzler enables you to scamper, jump, and skate across its 35 sandbox worlds with the aid of your PS Move controllers. It's as physically demanding to play as it is perplexing, and all the better for it. To The Top is a PSVR one-off.

16



Star Trek: Bridge Crew

Mixes the fanboy fantasy of nestling in the Captain's chair (or taking control of the helm, weapons, or engineering section) on a USS starship with the strongest co-op experience on PSVR. This is Star Trek's finest hour on PlayStation, and the community's great.

17



Everybody's Golf VR

Golf and virtual reality go together like ham and eggs or rhubarb and custard. Mmm, tasty. In PSVR you swing and chip shots, lean over putts, and become immersed in the act of putting a ball in a small hole. It's near perfection, and one of PSVR's essentials.

18



Sprint Vector

A crazy mix of SSX racing and obstacle course hijinks, Sprint Vector makes use of the best control setup on PSVR to deliver a near-perfect experience. A single-player Challenge mode and online races impress; only the poor single-player AI holds it back.

19



I Expect You To Die 2: The Spy and The Liar

A spy comedy offering a front-row seated experience. Known as The Phoenix to your foes, you thwart villains across six missions delightfully steeped in genre tropes. Short, silly, and slick – like only the best agents.

20



The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim VR

Though compromises have been made to texture detail and controls, you get all – yes, *all* – of The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim, including the expansions, inside PSVR. It's immense. The scale and organic nature of the world at your feet overcomes any shortcomings.

21



Beat Saber

With your PSVR headset firmly on and PS Move controllers in hand, Beat Saber feels like the game both pieces of hardware were made for. In it you have to master songs and challenges by swiping your neon swords through the air and dodging with your head.

22



Moss: Book II

Arriving late in PSVR's life, this storybook followup spirits you away on an adventure that's every bit the mouse's whiskers. Quill's winning charm is back, and expanded combat mechanics sees your bond with the great mouse protagonist become stronger than ever.

23



Accounting+

One of PlayStation's funniest games is a dark, twisted journey into the world of accounting. No, don't walk away now! It's an Inception-like dive into increasingly bizarre and frequently hilarious scenarios that will scratch the itch of any Rick And Morty fan.

24



Farpoint

This sci-fi shooter is a brilliant showcase for the PS Aim controller, a versatile bit of kit that makes the satisfying range of weapons it stands in for feel weighty and real. The game matches it, delivering a strong story and challenging co-op for great VR action.

25



Knockout League

Punching things is possibly the least creative use of the VR medium, but when it's used to create a classic arcade boxing sim that plays like a brutal puzzle puncher, it's irresistible. It's also good for you: it tracks your calorie count as you work up a sweat.



WHAT'S NEW PLUS-SY CAT?

Digging into the random acts of gaming a lengthy PS Plus subscription offers

In November PS Plus took us from sorcery to swords. The **Lego Harry Potter Collection** was only on PS4, but bobbing along on both PS4 and PS5 was zero-gravity puzzler **Heavenly Bodies**. This month's final offering bursts that pleasant bubble and gets to the point: **Nioh 2**.

Available on both PS4 and PS5, Team Ninja's 2020 action RPG struck bold and true to the tune of 9/10. Leaving behind the blonde ponytail of the previous game's protagonist William Adams, you instead play as your own custom half-demon hero named Hide.

After meeting and befriending the travelling merchant Tokichiro, you form a demon-slaying partnership under the shared alias 'Hideyoshi'. Tokichiro, along with his monkey guardian spirit, is the brains of your demon-slaying operation – though with combat like this, you're no slouch either.

Offering a slew of weapons to choose from upfront, plus demonic transformations, magic, and more, combat has an incredible amount of depth. For a start, you can hot-swap between two main weapons, be they

swords, spears, or even switchglaives, as well as wielding two more long-range weapons. Each one has a pretty intimidating skill tree to master, making your Hide's fighting style distinctly your own...

though this also means you can blame no one but yourself when you inevitably bite the dust.

And scoop up a mouthful of dust you shall; part of the 'masocore' genre, this one's intense difficulty will bring out the masochist at your core. It's an acquired taste for sure, but you'll find yourself coming back for more punishment from these big beasts.

Boasting over 50 hours of mainline story, plus heaps of DLC to sink your teeth into, Nioh 2 remains a demanding though satisfying ARPG – all wrapped up in a distinctly devilish package.



Burst Countering these big boys deals a massive hit to their posture.

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TO PAGE 56



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RetroStation



112 Plus Points

We revisit the Bay Area on PS Plus, and relive hacker group DeadSec's glory days

HIGHLIGHTS

MEMORY CARD: FAR CRY 3 [108](#) | DEFENDING: SEPHIROTH [109](#) | CLASSIC GAME: F1 2010 [110](#)

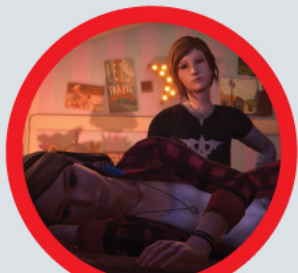
PLUS POINTS: WATCH DOGS 2 [112](#) | A BRIEF HISTORY OF... VAMPIRE GAMES [113](#)

PARTING SHOT: THE WITCHER 3 [114](#)



DON'T DELETE

Save icons for these December moments spin in the PLAY hive mind. Do you remember this?



5 YEARS

The final episode of *Life is Strange: Before the Storm* followed Chloe Price as she worked the case alone. Her latest lead ends in a violent altercation. Urged to follow the trail no matter where it leads, tough choices are constant.



15 YEARS

Portal encouraged outside-the-box thinking through space-bending puzzles. The ever-watchful AI GLaDOS poses novel conundrums for silent protagonist Chell, an unwilling test subject who's quietly biding her time until she can escape the research facility.



20 YEARS

Fighter *Dragon Ball Z: Budokai* follows 'what if' scenarios for the anime series' first three arcs. In these alternate takes, Vegeta finally bests Goku, Frieza gets his wish for immortality, and Cell has a strange nightmare.

MEMORY CARD

Far Cry 3

Here's to ten years of sun, sea, and slaughter



You can fight fire with fire (in every sense) or adopt a sneakier approach. If all else fails, there's always the local wildlife.

How's this for a nightmare situation? Clueless backpackers skydive onto the fictitious Rook islands, soon becoming caught between the native Rakyat tribe's fight for their home, and pirate lord Vaas Montenegro's hostile takeover.

Remembered for its since widely imitated open world design and a charismatic villain who was never afraid to get up in your face, the third *Far Cry* marked a true turning point for the series.

Reader @Beregond explains, "I loved *Far Cry 2* but it had a lot of issues – 3 corrected every one."

Problems like erratic AI behaviour and a world that seemed to barely notice your presence plagued *Far Cry 2* (though it's still fondly regarded by pyromaniac players). *Far Cry 3* addressed many of these elements.

JM Baron calls it "The best *Far Cry* ever."

@TheRhysCooper says it was one of the best games of its generation, adding, "It still holds up. Definitely my favourite *Far Cry*."

Jay Hardcore agrees: "Great game – first played on PS3, [but the PS4] remaster is still good too."

GOT THE T-SHIRT

As one of the earlier examples of Ubisoft's famous open world formula, the game has all the collectibles and points of interest you'd expect.

@TheRhysCooper has seen and done it all. "Funnily enough I just finished playing through it again last week and earned the Platinum trophy."



INFO

PUB Ubisoft
DEV Ubisoft Montreal
RELEASED ON PlayStation 3
RELEASE 2012

IF YOU LIKE THIS, TRY THIS...

Just Cause 4 boasts a similarly tropical setting but really ups the ante with its reactive world – we hope you brought your wingsuit.

Join in the conversation as we celebrate PlayStation's past, present, and future with our community: you can email us at play@futurenet.com.

"Definitely a surprise Platinum for me at the time," @D3J08 says, before musing, "Why they never released a physical version of *Blood Dragon*, though... [Shrug emoji]"

While the standalone expansion made its PS4 debut late last year in digital form, we'll have to save the full *Blood Dragon* story for another time.

BYTE SIZE BITS

Essential numbers that add together to tell you everything you need to know about the game.

10,000,000

Copies of the game were sold within its first two years of release, even though preorders had been low.

1,500

Days – that's approximately how long development took, with preproduction starting in 2008.

04

Episode webseries *Far Cry: The Experience* starred Christopher Mintz-Plasse as himself and saw Michael Mando reprise his role as the villainous Vaas in live action.



DEFENDING

Sephiroth

Maybe Final Fantasy VII's silken-haired archvillain simply needs a hug, argues Jon Bailes

He's often considered one of the greatest videogame villains of all, but deep down is Sephiroth really such a bad guy? Put yourself in his boots for a minute – wouldn't you have become a murderous megalomaniac too? With a better start in life, who knows, Sephy could have been a productive member of society. Sometimes you're just dealt a bad hand.

It's never a sign of a healthy family when your father injects you with the cells of an ancient alien once called 'the calamity from the skies' while you're still in the womb. But Sephiroth had the misfortune to be sired by Hojo, a Shinra scientist with absolutely no paternal instinct. Or sense of ethics. Things only got worse when helpless baby Sephiroth was taken from his mother at birth, experimented on, and transformed into an elite SOLDIER, thanks to his extra-terrestrial-enhanced power. It's a wonder, then, that young Sephiroth grew up to be a functioning adult at all. Even if he was sour-faced and arrogant, you could hang out with him and without worrying he was going to impale you.

Unfortunately, in Final Fantasy VII's famous flashback scene, he discovers the truth and topples over the edge, then burns down the village of Nibelheim. From here, subsequent felonies include murdering the lovely Aerith and summoning a meteor from space so he can rule/destroy the planet. Not good. But having been lied to all these years he has a right to be angry. And frankly, when he kills President Shinra, he's really doing the world a favour. Most importantly, though, is it really Sephiroth committing these atrocities or those alien Jenova cells exerting their maternal influence over him? Perhaps he would have turned out different with some real motherly love.



WHAT DO I HAVE TO BE SAD ABOUT? I AM THE CHOSEN ONE. I HAVE BEEN CHOSEN TO BE THE LEADER OF THIS PLANET."

Sephiroth goes from arrogance to messiah complex in short order and never looks back.



INFO

MAIN GAMES
Final Fantasy VII

STATS

Sephiroth was designed by Tetsuya Nomura, the director of Kingdom Hearts and Final Fantasy VII Remake.

The character's name comes from the Kabbalah, where ten sephirot represent the ten attributes through which God reveals himself.

Sephiroth was originally written to be Aerith's sibling, and then her ex-boyfriend, before both ideas were dropped.

SPIN-OFFS

Crisis Core: Final Fantasy VII, Dirge of Cerberus: Final Fantasy VII, Ehrgeiz, Kingdom Hearts II, Dissidia Final Fantasy, LittleBigPlanet

HOW TO PLAY?

Final Fantasy VII (PS4) – £12.99 (PS Store); Final Fantasy VII Remake (PS5/4) – £59.99 (PS Store)

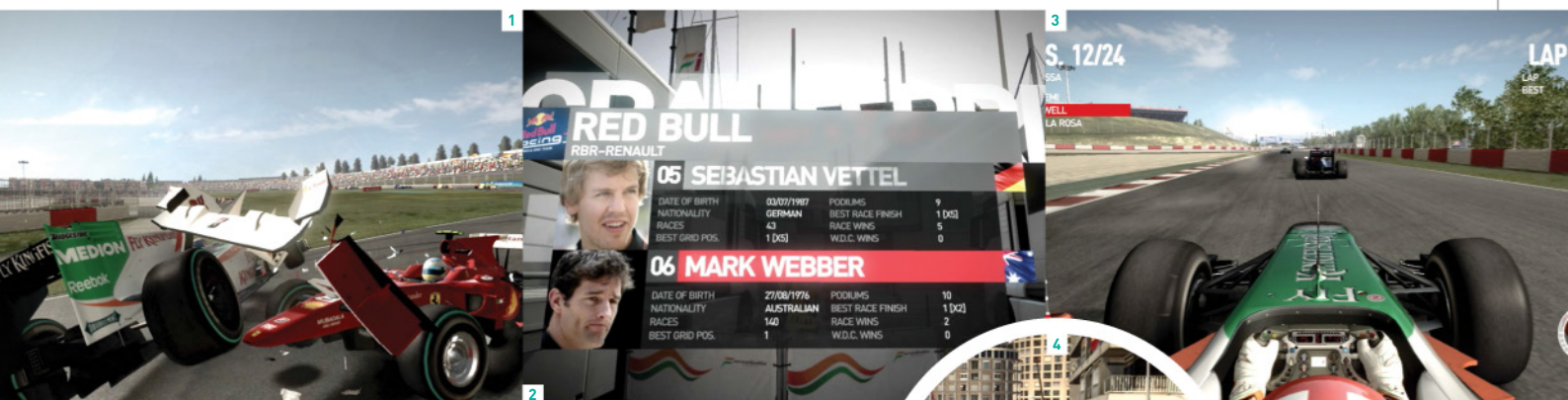


CLASSIC GAME

F1 2010

Codemasters' F1 debut on PlayStation still fires on all cylinders





Back in 2010, Codemasters was on a high, coming off the back of two fantastic racers, namely *Race Driver Grid* and *Dirt 2*. The company's EGO engine was head and shoulders above every other racing game's, offering incredible detail, spectacular crash damage, and a revolutionary 'rewind' feature. The thought of all that being applied to a licensed F1 game was mouthwatering, and the one we got didn't disappoint.

Loading up the game now, you can see the Grid/Dirt DNA in everything from the 3D menus and trailer-dwelling front end to the rock music (complete with wah pedal guitar solos) in the race replays. And it's amazing how close the game feels to its current counterpart. It may only run at 30fps and even below that in busy scenes, and it's a bit messy in the middle distance thanks to the lower resolution of 2006's circuitry, but it still looks great overall.

In fact, it looks so good, it's almost like taking a time machine back to a simpler era. Sky Sports' modern-day pit reporter Karun Chandhok is driving here

modern games' prangs. Cars have real weight and yet become properly airborne during accidents, resulting in cars flipping off the circuit and bouncing *onto* each other. Front wings disintegrate in a cascade of physics objects and you can freeze time in the replays and move the camera around, before rolling the carnage forward in super-slow motion. Quite why crashes were subsequently pared back year after year remains a mystery, but F1 2010 does it really well.

In green-flag conditions it's cute to see arcadier gameplay woven into this 2010 title, like your engine overheating behind another car, turning green again on the HUD when you pull out into cleaner air. Oversimplified, perhaps, but it plays so well.

SPIN DOCTORS

The driving is initially difficult, as the cars yearn to spin under acceleration, but tweak the setup and respect the progressive throttle control and they can be tamed. Better yet, switch on traction control and the game becomes outrageously playable. You can really hone your racing line and push hard for

"The cars yearn to spin under acceleration, but tweak the setup and respect the throttle control and they can be tamed."

alongside Bruno Senna(!), and Michael Schumacher is in the Mercedes because Lewis Hamilton's still at McLaren. It seems like forever ago. The cockpit cam isn't obscured by a halo, making you feel dangerously exposed, the tyre choice is Options or Primes, and there's no sign of DRS. And in the pre-hybrid era, the engines really wail. It feels like the Wild West of racing, all danger and spectacle.

GIVES YOU WILLINGS

Speaking of which, the crashes are great in F1 2010, arguably better than the

more time, dancing on the edge of control. Whereas later titles are glossy, slick, and so-very-serious 'official videogames of the Formula One World Championship', F1 2010 is an old-school racing game at heart. It's nice to be reminded of the genre's old values.

This being Codies' first shot at a modern F1 sim, there are some funny teething problems to enjoy. The pit coding is dreadful: pit from first place and your mechanics hold you in your box until it's 'safe' to release you, which is usually when everyone else has driven

- 1 Cars frequently leave the ground, which they rarely do in modern games.
- 2 Look at young Seb! He's more Red Bull than Red Bull.
- 3 DRS wasn't introduced until 2011, so it's all about slipstreaming here.
- 4 Many tracks have changed in the last decade, but Monaco is its glorious self.
- 5 You can be interviewed by David Croft.



INFO

PUB Codemasters
DEV Codemasters Birmingham

RELEASED 2010

GET IT NOW
£7.99 Amazon,
£1 CEX

NEED TO KNOW

1 F1 2010 won a BAFTA for Best Sports Game. Which was nice.

2 Codemasters Birmingham has been in charge of the series for 12 years.

3 There was, however, a Codemasters-published F1 2009 on PSP by Sumo Digital.

past, leaving you dead last. Oops. Then there's the slightly yellow graphical filter applied to everything, nicknamed the 'p*ss filter' by the internet, which is harsh because the idea was surely to romanticise the action, which is something more racing games should try. Perhaps not with yellow, though.

Still, Codemasters' initial foray into F1 remains a glorious success. Combining simulation sensibilities with that slight arcade slant means it's highly authentic while remaining far easier to understand and play than modern F1 titles. The late noughties was a magic time for Codemasters, and while F1 2010 came at the tail-end of that flash of brilliance, it still casts a shadow over its many pretenders. At the risk of mixing all the metaphors (Metaphormula One? Yes!), F1 2010 took the last gulp of that bottled lightning from Race Driver Grid and set its sights on the championship in its rookie year. Bold and fearless, apologising to no-one, it remains a shining jewel in the genre's crown. ■



PLUS POINTS

Watch Dogs 2

Is this sequel worth revisiting or has Legion made it obsolete?



1 Multiplayer mayhem returns, offering both co-operative and competitive missions. **2** Marcus has lots of non-lethal gizmos. **3** Who could say 'no' to these nerds? DedSec here is very likeable.

See that CCTV camera? You can hack that from your phone. That electrically-powered gate? You can hack that too. Security van?

Send it crashing backwards with a swish and flick of your phone screen. It's amazing what you can do with your phone – all this and selfies too.

Ditching the first game's distinctly dislikeable protagonist Aiden Pearce, this Watch Dogs sequel surveys an all-new city through the eyes of fresh-faced Marcus Holloway, a good-looking young chap who gets drawn into the shadowy world of hacking after being framed for a crime he didn't commit. Three years after the events of the first game, the next generation of Blume's near-future neural network ctOS debuts in San

Francisco – and accuses Marcus of carrying out a high-tech robbery. After setting the record straight by breaking into a Blume server farm and wiping his profile from the network, members of hacktivist group DedSec welcome him into the fold.

FRIENDS IN CHAT

From there, you're foiling and exposing Blume through slick point-and-shoot hacking¹ alongside a lovable, nerdy group of rogues including artist/DJ Sitara, quiet Josh, and mask-wearing enigma Wrench. Though thinly sketched in some regards, they are actual characters, making them immediately preferable to followup game Legion's 'Play Anyone' gimmick. Seeing the San Fran crew come together to plan a heist or even just enthuse about the new



INFO

PUB Ubisoft
DEV Ubisoft Montreal
RELEASED 2016

Cyberdriver trailer is always a treat, and their characterisation much better serves the resistance movement plot the entire series is built around.

Setting our faves to one side, we'd be remiss not to mention the larger-than-life personality of the city itself. Between hacktivist breaking-and-entering, there are the usual open world trimmings of rooftop collectibles and audio logs to sniff out in this fictionalised Bay Area, all tempered by plenty of surprises along the way. From interrupting a drag queen's wedding photo shoot to peeping that one NPC who likes to pretend he's a tree, it's always worth exploring these streets.²

FOOTNOTES ¹ The likes of remote hacks and combat yo-yos make it possible to play mostly non-lethally. ² Instagram fiends will love the in-game selfie app ScoutX.

HAVE YOUR SAY

Readers tell us what they think of our choice



HACKING WITHOUT COMMAND LINES [...] OR BURNING YOUR HEAD WITH SQL AND SCRIPTS – THAT WORKS FOR ME!!!

Michell Ortega



I LOVED IT! IN FACT, IT WAS THE REASON I BOUGHT A PS4 IN THE FIRST PLACE."

@chrisjhack



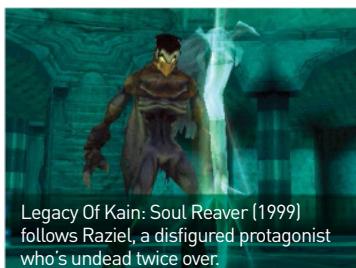
FOR ME AS A GAY MAN, IT WAS GROUNDBREAKING. [...] SAN FRANCISCO, QUEER, WITH AMAZING ACTION! I LONG FOR MORE."

@wiccanwordsmith

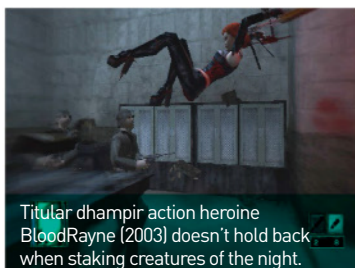
► We go vampire hunting in **Castlevania: Lords Of Shadow** on PS Plus

A BRIEF HISTORY OF Vampires

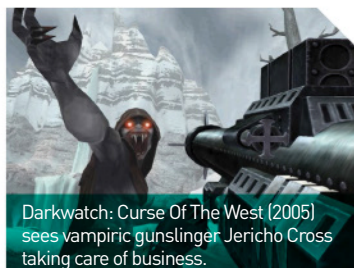
Splashing claret all over the PlayStation timeline



Legacy Of Kain: Soul Reaver (1999) follows Raziel, a disfigured protagonist who's undead twice over.



Titular dhampir action heroine BloodRayne (2003) doesn't hold back when staking creatures of the night.



Darkwatch: Curse Of The West (2005) sees vampiric gunslinger Jericho Cross taking care of business.

Vampire Hunter D loosely follows the plot of the film **Vampire Hunter D: Bloodlust**. In each **Shadow Hearts**, one of the Valentine clan joins your party. In **Infamous 2: Festival Of Blood** Cole MacGrath takes out a fanged coven in New Marais.

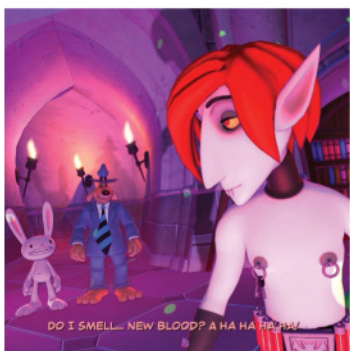
CASTLE ROCKS

Music to your fears

You can't talk about the bitey undead without mentioning *Castlevania: Symphony Of The Night* (1997). In it, Dracula's castle mysteriously reappears and white-haired pretty boy Alucard vows to destroy it in a title that turns 2D platforming on its head (literally). A number of sequels and spin-offs followed on PlayStation, including 3D action sub-series *Lords Of Shadow* (2010-2014).



ROBERT CARLYLE IS DRACULA AND PATRICK STEWART IS ZOBEC IN **CASTLEVANIA: LORDS OF SHADOW 2**



Sam & Max are terrorised by German vamp Jurgen in *Beyond Time And Space*.



The Sims 4: Vampires (2017) brought cosy coffins and tuneful pipe organs.



In *Vampyr* (2018), Edwardian medic Dr Jonathan Reid wrestles to balance his new-found bloodthirst with the Hippocratic oath.



Code Vein (2019) offers soulslike anime action in a post-apocalyptic world where blood grows on trees. Who'd have thought vampires could be vegan?



DINING ON DICE

Fanged friends at the table

Vampire: The Masquerade has dominated tabletop roleplaying for decades, and it's made the jump to PlayStation. Besides visual novels *Coteries Of New York* and *Shadows Of New York* (both 2020), there's chatty RPG *Swansong* (2022). The most surprising outing, though, is battle royale *Bloodhunt* (2022), in which fanged fiends duke it out.

► Next issue: we search for the spirit of **Christmas** on PlayStation



Phillip Strenger's demise sets the tone for a complex adventure in **The Witcher 3**

Most games would treat the death of a tyrant as a victory, but there's nothing to savour here. It's an incredible moment, and a powerful lesson to newcomers. In this world, you can't save everyone – you can't even come close.

NEXT MONTH

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THE 2023 PREVIEW SPECIAL

It looks like we've got a horrifyingly good year ahead

PLAY

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